

# ABRAHAM, MY FRIEND

by Ron Bailey

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*Bailey's study of Abraham's life beginning with the principle that all Christian biography must start with God. He traces the patriarch's calling, faith, failures, and ultimate friendship with God, drawing lessons for believers about walking by faith in daily life.*

63 Chapters

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## Abraham, My Friend

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## Chapter 01

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### Abraham, My Friend

#### The Making of a Praying Man

##### Preface:

Every story has a purpose and my re-telling of this story has its purpose revealed in our sub-title. Abraham's life is rich in illustration of the purposes of God and the daily incidents of a pilgrim but our ultimate goal will be to identify elements in the life of Abraham which made possible this amazing testimony from God Himself; Abraham, My Friend. [Isaiah 41:8]

There are many wonderful ways in which God describes His relationship with men and woman but this must be one of the most extraordinary; Abraham, My Friend. If Abraham had referred to God as 'my friend' we might have thought that he was guilty of 'name-dropping'; the way in which some folk try to derive significance by association. If I were to refer to 'Abraham, my friend' I might lay myself open to that same accusation, but why should God refer to this man as 'My Friend'?

Perhaps there is an indication in the New Testament. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. [John 15:15] Friends become the carriers of unique, intimate, knowledge because they can be trusted. It almost takes the breath away to say it but it is a regular testimony of scripture that God trusted Abraham. Abraham himself is the archetype of the man who trusts God but Abraham, My Friend, is an indication of God's reliance upon Abraham. It brings to mind many another scripture; I sought for a man... ..to stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none. [Ezekiel 22:30] Oh, what would He do if He could only find the right man? EM Bounds famous book, Power through Prayer, begins with the statement that the "Men are God's method. The Church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men." In turn, that brings to mind the comment of Paul Billheimer "Who knows what God would do for His servants if He dared?"

In Abraham, God found the kind of man He had looked for, a man who would become My Friend. He became God's trusted agent, 'our man on earth' through whom God would further His purpose. Not in ignorance, as some kind of automaton blindly following an instruction, but as My Friend. What God accomplishes on earth He will accomplish through His Friends. Christians love to say that God accomplishes wonderful things 'in spite of' His servants. There is a truth in this statement but it ought not to blind us to the opposite and equally true statement that He accomplishes even more 'because of His servants'. He will accomplish more through one trusted Friend than through a billion super-efficient tools. "Men are God's method."

Prayer, of course, functions at many levels; it usually begins with a sense of dependence and need. The man or woman who does not pray is an 'atheist' no matter what theology he subscribes to. He is also a 'fool'; a word reserved, biblically, for those who leave God out of their reckoning.

But prayer that remains at the level of personal need is still-born. The unique glory of the pray-er is that he has more than one friend; he has two. And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? [Luke 11:5,6] That's not one friend, but two. The pray-er is the living link between the Resource and the Need. If this chain is broken at either end the Resource and the Need remain separated; he must maintain living contact with both. There is valuable insight here. The pray-er is conscious of his own lack and inadequacy. He has nothing to set before him but the wonder is that he has access to another friend who has all necessary resources. Only by maintaining our links with both friends can be the channel of the blessing.

It took the Quakers to remind us that 'Friends' is a New Testament description of believers gathered in a local church. But I trust I shall shortly see thee, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be to thee. Our friends salute thee. Greet the friends by name. [3 John 1:14] As we regard the settings where God has placed us, how well are we functioning as Friends? The Church comes under a lot a legitimate criticism but we would be using our unique role to better purpose if we prayed for our Friends. If we know that they lack resources, we know where we can go to find an answer. It would doubtless have many spin-off blessings; double portions even. It is recorded that the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. [Job 42:10] Perhaps if we are seeking release and blessing our best route is to pray for our friends.

The Greek word for 'friend' (gk: philos) is a word of tenderness and companionship. It is a word which speaks of fellowship. The original Hebrew word for 'friend' has another mood, (hb: ahab) it is the word for 'Lover'. The Septuagint translators translated it not by 'philos' but 'agapE' giving something like 'Abraham, My Lover'. It shocks us to read it. God's love is not marked by faithful duty and companionship only, but by passion and exclusive personal commitment.

We begin to sense the personal relationship that blossomed between God and man. If Abraham is a man characterised by his faith, his faith is characterised by his love; this is authentic faith, faith that worketh by love [Galatians 5:6]. It was not from isolated experiences that Abraham was designated as Abraham, My Friend but from a continuing relationship that grew throughout a lifetime. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. It came not primarily from enormous crisis experiences characterised by giant leaps into the dark, but through the single 'steps of that faith of our father Abraham'. [Romans 4:12]

So it is with Abraham's children, we grow not by big bangs and heroic set-piece triumphs, but by daily obediences of love. Not by stage-managed performances in the public arena but in the secret places where only God is witness. For those who measure success by visible effects it is often a weary plodding existence, but for those who genuinely seek only to be approved unto God it holds the prospect that in some secret place, one day, God will say this is 'Abraham, My Friend'

## Chapter 02

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter One: Beginnings

In the beginning God...

Every Christian biography should begin with the words "In the beginning God.." Our Bible begins with these words and, on reflection, it could begin with no others. How else would anything 'begin'? The gospel according to John mirrors Genesis and expands it; In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. [John 1:1-3] ... It is the only explanation for everything; without Him there is nothing. It is the only explanation for anything; without him was not anything. That's a question that atheistic cosmologists refuse to ask; 'why is there anything?' It was said of such cosmologists, by a fellow cosmologist, that they are "often in error but never in doubt". Ask them 'how?' and you will hear the most extraordinary explanations of quantum theory and oscillating super-strings expressed with absolute certainty. Ask them 'why?' and there is no answer. Their calculations take us to the first micro-seconds of the cosmos but only revelation can take us back to the beginning where God already was.

For the child of God this truth is both humbling and exhilarating. In comparison to the vastnesses of the cosmos the human race is totally insignificant; if those cosmologists are right, just star-litter. Sometimes our confident knowledge blinds us to more profound realities. 3000 years ago a shepherd boy lay on his back and looked up; When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. [Psalms 8:3-5]

The Bible's timeline too is overwhelming. God's 'mindfulness' of man is not some sudden thought pressed upon Him by the pains of the human race. Before anything was we were in His thoughts. The Bible captures this sense sometimes in plain words and sometimes in amazing imagery. The book of Proverbs takes us back to the beginnings and we hear the 'testimony of Jesus which is the spirit of prophecy'. He is conscious that He belongs to His Father, before any creative acts have occurred; the LORD possessed me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old. [Proverbs 8:22] The extraordinary testimony continues as the creation is about to be brought into being; then I was beside him, like a master workman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, [Proverbs 8:30] What a wonderful picture this is of Father and Son 'daily, delighting in each other's company' and 'eternity ringing with joy'; Father and Son in perfect fellowship. God, the only self-sufficient Being, needing nothing outside Himself; needing no heaven, no creation. Perfectly at home and fulfilled in Himself.

Consider then the wonder of this continuing testimony; and my delights were with the sons of men. [Proverbs 8:31] That is to say that Before ever the earth was, when there were no depths, no fountains abounding with water, no mountains... while as yet he had not made the earth... his delights were with the sons of men. He loved us long before He made us. He delighted over us; can you hear the excited anticipation? Oh, what a heart-break we have been to Him. What glorious plans He had for us; what a bitter disappointment we have been. This is no isolated text, John captures another for us in his record of Christ's prayer; (thou) hast loved them, as thou hast loved me... thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world. [John 17:23,24]. As they say, "do the math(s)". If 'He has loved us as He loved Him', and 'He has loved Him from before the foundation of the world', how long has He loved us?

Our failures have not taken Him by surprise nor changed His love for us. The Old Testament comes to the end of its record of failure after failure with a simple word of testimony from God to His own people; I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet you say... [Malachi 1:2] His world has conspired together against Him and against His Christ. [Psalms 2:2] and yet His testimony is unchanged; I have loved you.

It is from this unchanged and unchanging love that all those 'agains' come. To a prodigal world God has reached out again and again. The book is full of them. The word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time... [Jonah 3:1] So He made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. [Jeremiah 18:4] And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall yet again take root downward, and bear fruit upward [2 Kings 19:30] And prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD he was God. [2 Chronicles 33:13] and we hear it again in the words of those who have His love shed abroad in their hearts; My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you. [Galatians 4:19] While there is God there is hope, because where there is God there exists the possibility of a new beginning.

So we will discover it with Abraham. And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith Jehovah, the God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt of old time beyond the River, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor: and they served other gods. And I took your father Abraham from beyond the River, and led him...[Joshua 24:2,3] Not a very promising background is it? Far off in a pagan land, serving other gods; many of us had our beginnings in such places, and God took us and led us... Perhaps, as you read, you feel yourself to be in such a place now, with nothing to offer and under the rule of alien powers. You feel that God may do something with others but not with you. The English have a pessimistic old saying "you can't make a silk purse out of a pig's ear". Don't be discouraged; God can! From your impossible situation, God can take you and lead you. Your future is not determined by your past experiences but by today's response to God. Where God is, there is always scope for a new beginning.

They say that every journey must begin with a first step, but the pilgrim does not mark the beginning of his journey with his own first step. In one way or another he senses a divine imperative. He may not use the exact words but, if you look under the skin, his testimony will always start at the same point.. "In the beginning God.."

## Chapter 03

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter One: Beginnings

Known unto God

In British War Cemeteries throughout the world you often come across the words 'Known unto God' engraved on tombstones. It signifies that the person whose remains lie in this spot cannot be identified. At one and the same time, it is a bleak comment on the lonely anonymous sacrifice of so many and a reminder that, in truth, we are never alone. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. [Matthew 10:29] Modern translators feel an urge to complete this sentence and add words like 'without your Father's will' or 'without your Father's knowledge' or 'without your Father's permission'. It is better to leave it just as it is 'nothing happens without your Father' and then think about the implications; He cannot be excluded.

An old story is told about an atheist shoemaker. He was visited by his grand-daughter and he decided to make use of the time by sowing his atheism while she was young. He wrote out the sentence 'God is nowhere' and got her to copy it onto her slate while he went back to his shoemaking. He returned expecting to find the sentence copied out several times and engraved on her mind. However the slate was too narrow for a child's large letters so she had found it necessary to break up the largest word to make it fit. The shoemaker looked down on the slate and found a sentence repeated several times; it read 'God is now here'.

There are no 'God-forsaken' places and God is at work in them all. Christ's own testimony was And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. [John 12:32]. He was lifted up and He is drawing all men to Himself. Contrary to the impression given by some modern Christian choruses this statement has nothing to do with our praise but is a simple statement of fact. as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: This is not to say that all will cooperate with His 'drawings', but in every place and every soul the 'drawing' is at work. (God) now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: [Acts 17:30]

Abraham's home-town of Ur of the Chaldees (10 miles west of modern Nasiriyeh, Iraq) could never have been called 'God-forsaken'. If anything, it was god-infested. It is impossible to be completely accurate with dates but the Bible record and the lifestyle details of Abraham indicate that his story begins approximately 2000 BC. (as a 'rule of thumb' we can work on Abraham c2000 BC, Moses c1500 BC, David c1000BC, the rebuilding of Jerusalem c500 BC) Room 56 in the British Museum is full of fascinating artefacts from the Royal Tombs of Ur (c2600) right through to the time of Abraham.

Ur was a capital city for much of this time. The delicate skills of its craftsmen were amazing. Working in gold, silver, lapis lazuli, ivory, and bronze they have left us an eloquent description of life between the rivers (Mesopotamia). They had four-ass-powered, four-wheel chariots with replaceable wheels where the warrior had an armoury of throwing spears and his own driver. They had a written language and law-codes and highly regulated patterns of life. Ur's position on the Euphrates gave it ready access to exotic imports through Basra, where the Euphrates meets the Tigris, and the Persian Gulf. Its merchants traded in precious stones and metals and its agriculturists worked complicated irrigation systems which guaranteed them rich harvests. And they built enormous temple mounds, including the famous Great Ziggurat of Ur (a kind of step-pyramid which stood over 60' tall and more than 200' wide) which would have dominated the skyline for all of Abraham's growing years. They worshipped and propitiated a pantheon of gods, both heavenly and from the underworld, and developed an elaborate priestcraft. There are many fascinating legal seals which show aspects of Ur religion. One shows a supreme god seated and approached by two goddesses with right hands raised; the symbol of allegiance and supplication. The goddesses are leading a man into the presence of the greater god. Archaeologists sometimes call these minor goddesses 'intercessors'; by their actions they bring men into the presence of god. It is an interesting insight into a role that one day Abraham would fulfil, not by pagan ritual but because he became 'Abraham, My Friend'.

Around the time that Abraham was born Ur of the Chaldees fell under violent incursions from nomadic Amorites. The empire of Ur-Nammu collapsed and for the next 200 years Ur was the centre of turbulent times as other cities vied for supremacy. Terah raised his family in Ur at this time and at the ripe age of 130 he fathered Abraham, his youngest son. Terah was an Ur-ite through and through. He had seen Ur-Nammu (2112-2095 BC) arrive, had watched the development of his dynasty, empire and religion and had outlasted him, but now the city was in turmoil (2004 BC). At some point during his time in Ur his eldest son, Haran (Lot's father), had died in his father's presence. What tragedy lies behind this simple statement? Was this one of the factors which 'unsettled' Terah? Did he leave Ur for the safety of his remaining family? We have no answers to these questions other than to say all the answers were 'Known unto God'. God was not excluded from the ebbing and flowing of empires, nor was He missing when Haran died in his father's presence in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees.

We often hear of Abraham's faith, and we will come to that soon, but the first account of Abraham's departure from Ur is contained in the words And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there. [Genesis 11:31] Terah took them; this makes Terah the prime mover in these events. Now this raises a further question; can God be at work in the decision of an idol-worshipping head of a family whose decisions are based on fear and who has no knowledge of the true God?

My old preacher friend once said "When you are newly Christian you will marvel at the way that God intervenes in answer to your prayers; when you get older you will see that God's grace is even more evident in His providence." Have you been nicely settled in 'Ur' enjoying its sophistication and predictability? It may be that God will have to loosen your ropes with events that disturb and bring pain. It may be that He will unfold His will through the actions of someone who

doesn't even know Him. Sometimes He speaks through your enemies. As Josiah discovered to his loss, sometimes your worst enemy's words are from the mouth of God. [2 Chron 20-23]

Don't be too quick to shake off the dictates of secular or family authority. God knew what He was doing when He placed you there. Even though you are 'born-again' and have insights that your parents lack this may be a time when you are to be subject to them; though they understood not the saying which He spake unto them. And He went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them; for another 18 years! The circumstance that chafes so persistently may yet be God's unique provision for you. In terms of providence we learn very little in prospect, a little more in context, but most of all in retrospect. And best of all we discover that while we were fretting and wondering what we should do next it was already 'Known unto God'. When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat? And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do.

Don't fret little bird, trapped in your narrow cage, He knows what He will do. Empires will rise and fall but in the midst of all the fog of war He is silently planning for you, in love. And He will use their rise and fall to do things in you that will last forever. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. [1 John 2:17]

## Chapter 04

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter One: Beginnings

When he was called

The story of the steps of the faith of our father Abraham is not only to be found in the book of Genesis. Again and again the scriptures return to this man, often adding unique information to the original story. So the story continually builds of the man who, a thousand years after his death, God still called, Abraham, My Friend. [Isaiah 41:8]

I wonder how many people actually left Ur at this time. At the head of the group was Terah, whose name links him with the worship of the moon-god. He was head of the clan and the scripture says he took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law. [Genesis 11:31] He set out with the intention of travelling to the land of Canaan, although he never arrived. From later evidence we deduce that Nahor and his family were also part of the caravan. I wonder too how many servants and members of the household were part of this migration. It seems from the evidence that the 'clan' prospered in Haran and on the second leg of the journey to Canaan they took with them all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran. [Gen 12] By the time we get to Genesis 14 Abraham is a minor chieftain with a personal army of over 300 men. If we give each of those men a wife and 2 children, we can estimate that by this time Abraham's own 'clan' was more than 1200 souls. As an answer to our original question, my personal estimate of the size of that original group which migrated from Ur is more than 2000 souls. Time to revise those Sunday School pictures of Abraham in his solitary tent in an empty desert?

We cannot be sure of the motivations for their journey. Perhaps they were migrants or refugees from troubled areas. Perhaps Lot just followed his grandfather. Perhaps the servants had no choice. But for one man out of the thousands there was an entirely different motivation; Abraham had seen God. And he (Stephen) said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,

We can see again the insistence on God's initiation. Abraham did not find God, God appeared to Abraham. In the midst of his muddled theology Zophar the Naamathite asked Job a very pertinent question; Canst thou by searching find out God? [Job 11:7] The answer, by implication, is 'No'. It is not possible for the finite to discover the infinite. We could know nothing at all about God if God had not chosen to reveal Himself, but we are not left in the dark; the God of glory has appeared. The God of glory, The King of Glory, the Lord of Glory seem to be titles of the Son. Is this partly what the Lord was referring to when He said Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad [John 8:56]? We shall look at some other possibilities later. According to the

scripture, God's appearances to Abraham were very few but Abraham's response to those revelations changed the history of the world.

There is something very wonderful about this event. It did not happen in a lonely desert or at a 'convention'. It happened when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran. In the city dedicated to the moon-god, in a family which served the moon-god, the God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham. In the ordinary course of his everyday life God broke in and the God of glory appeared. God still breaks in to the everyday patterns of our lives. Later we look back at His providential preparations and see His hand in a thousand touches upon our lives, but for the man or woman who will be God's Friend there must be a conscious encounter. We may not see a form or hear a voice but we will have absolutely no doubt that we have met Him. It may be that He will appear in the Scripture as we read, but if so it will not be logical deductions drawn from proof texts, as Tozer described it, but a vital encounter with God Himself. It is this encounter with God that begins the process of separation from the herd. Many may appear to be heading in the same general direction, thousands even, and for a while their paths may be side by side, but ultimately Abraham's footsteps of faith will lead him in unique ways. Abraham's real journey begins with a personal revelation of the God of Glory. So does ours.

We are not told if He fell at His feet as dead, as did John in the Revelation, but like John he heard a voice; Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. We shall need to return to this word to Abraham, but for the time being please take careful note of the personal pronouns, I and thee. This is an 'I-Thee' encounter initiated by God. In the midst of his family, and in the midst of a city wholly given to idolatry, the voice of God singled out Abraham; Get thee out of thy country...and I will make of thee a great nation.

There is promise of great personal blessing here and the promise of being a channel for even greater blessing but its implied condition is obedience. God says 'Abraham, you do this, and I will do this'. The moment is captured wonderfully in a single verse; By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. [Hebrews 11:8] If we compress the verse we may see its impact more clearly; Abraham, when he was called... obeyed. It is a simple life if we would but live it simply. Faith is response to revelation; faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. We cannot kick-start faith, God must speak. We must not berate ourselves that others have achieved more and gone further; we cannot 'obey' until He 'calls'. To go earlier would be presumption, to delay would be disobedience. But when God speaks, His word has creative power in the lives of those who receive, and we must never say "I can't". For, as Gabriel said to Mary, no word from God is powerless. When God speaks you can walk on water and you can stretch out withered hands. But not until He speaks.

This word to Abraham is a little short on explanation. It is simply a command; Get thee out. It was addressed to Abraham and no other. It was the beginning of a pilgrimage in which God would strip Abraham of all dependence upon any other resource than God Himself. He would not be able, as a contingency, to 'fall back' on his family or culture; this is all the eggs in one basket. And the

simple wonder of it all is that when he was called.. he obeyed, and he went out, not knowing whither he went. Many would obey God if He would only explain to them why or where He was leading them, but Abraham's greatness lies in that not knowing whither. He can have had no idea where his simple obedience would lead him, nor can we.

Here then are our final questions; when He calls 'will I obey or will I demand an explanation?' 'will I demand a vision for the future or will my vision of God Himself suffice?' 'will I demand a route map with all the answers written in or am I ready to move out now not knowing?' The God of glory stands ready to be 'all in all' to the man or woman who, when He calls, by faith, will obey.

## Chapter 05

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter One: Beginnings

Looking forward to The City

A journey of a thousand miles, say the Chinese, begins with the first step. The beginning of any venture is vital; if there are mistakes in the foundation it will be very costly to rectify. This is especially true of spiritual buildings and journeys. How often God has to bring us back to a place where we 'began wrong' before He can take us onwards in His will. But the first step is not the whole journey, and to begin is no guarantee that we will arrive. How can that initial enthusiasm be sustained? Desire is the dynamic of progress. Ultimately desires determine direction and direction determines destiny. In elemental terms, we follow our hungers. We shall not understand Abraham's perseverance unless, in our more modern phrase, we can discover what 'made him tick'.

Abraham was torn out of his context with a command to get thee out and a promise that his destination would be the land that I will show thee. What gave him the courage to start and subsequently sustained him? Again we find the answer not in the Genesis narrative but in the Spirit inspired commentary; he was looking for the city, having foundations, whose architect and builder is God. [Hebrews 11:10] This is a fascinating phrase which has deep roots biblically. Even the tense is interesting. He was looking for; this is the imperfect, or continuing past tense. He was continually looking for the city. From the remainder of the verse we see that the statement covers his exodus and his perpetual sojourning; this was the abiding pattern of his life. From the moment of his leaving Ur of the Chaldees he was constantly looking for the city. I've restored the definite article too; this was not just any convenient city which he might stumble into, this was The City. The City would be distinguished from all other cities by the fact that its architect and builder was God Himself. What was Abraham looking for?

And where did he expect to find it? The word 'looking for' is not the word for 'search'; Abraham was not 'searching for The City'. The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament and earlier in the book of Hebrews; But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. [Hebrews 10:12,13] Here the same word 'looking for' is translated 'expecting'. It has the sense of expectation, anticipation. It is not 'looking for' but 'looking forward to'. Expectation/anticipation is a vital ingredient of faith. This was not some weary, dogged plod through hundreds of miles of sand. This was a man with an excitement and hunger which drew him on in every step. He was fully expecting to see The City.

In some ways the Bible is a tale of two cities. The first city was called Enoch and was built in direct defiance of God's punishment. [Genesis 4:12-17] Its architect and builder was Cain. He had murdered his brother and God's sentence was that Cain would be a 'fugitive and a wanderer'. Cain is fearful that man's vengeance might be more summary than God's and complains. God marks Cain as a man under God's sentence not man's. Cain leaves God's presence and heads eastwards, but he refuses to remain under God's sentence and defends himself against those he fears by building the first City. This is man refusing to submit to God and ensuring his own safety. The human race is obsessed with security. We feel vulnerable and exposed so we build our cities. (We need a 4000 year mind-set transplant here; in the 21st century everyone is heading for the country because of the dangers in the cities. In Abraham's day people lived in cities to secure themselves against the dangers of the country.)

Biblically, the city becomes a symbol of arrogant security. Man is secure, against God Himself. The cities became vast enterprises fitted for every danger; they could sometimes withstand sieges for years. They come to represent absolute systematised independence. The city comes to symbolise 'The World', not 'evil' necessarily in its most obscene forms but, the 'evil' that is independence from God.

There is a wonderful cameo of the rich man captured in Proverbs 18:11 The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit. The rich man needs nothing and no-one; his riches are his strong city; it's a powerful picture. The rich man can buy, for the most part, protection, health, provisions. He is secure in his independence. The World is rich; its technology, strategy, science, education, religion, provide a powerful defence. Some years ago a member of the British Royal family addressed a meeting of farmers. He spoke of their industry, their skills, their machinery, and their miracle crops. He summed up the confidence of the industry with the phrase we don't need God now. That is the spirit of the World, not essentially entertainment, philosophy or anti-religious, but independence from God. The ultimate among cities, in the development of its arrogant independence from God, is Babylon, with its tower; And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. [Genesis 11:4] Their project echoes the even older blasphemy of the power behind Babylon's king; I will ascend into heaven [Isaiah 14:13-15]

Lest we are too quick to point the finger we should examine our own resources, our own riches. Many are rich in character, spiritual experience, bible knowledge, communication skills, musical ability, counselling expertise. If God didn't turn up to the meeting on Sunday, how would we know? How far can we manage without Him? The answer to that question is the measure of our worldliness. Christ's testimony was, of myself I can do nothing.

Abraham had seen cities. If he left Haran at 75 years of age that would put his birth pretty much in the middle of the dynasty of Ur-Nammu. Ur-Nammu himself reigned from BC 2112-2095 and his family reigned until the fall of Ur in BC 2004. (There's an interesting date. I am writing this on the eve of AD 2004). Ur-Nammu was one of the great builders of the ancient world; the Great Ziggurat of Ur being his greatest remaining work. Abraham's growing years were spent among the evidences of empire, as they came under attack. He saw Ur in its finest hour and watched as it began to be destroyed. The builders of the day built on solid foundations and tried to include

spiritual foundations too. The British Museum has an .Ur-Nammu Foundation Peg; a small bronze peg, perhaps pushed into the ground by Ur-Nammu himself, depicting him as a priest providing a foundation for the city. Abraham had seen its glory, and was watching its fall. He had seen, with the unerring sight of revelation, that on earth we have no continuing city.

In its place had grown a hunger for spiritual reality, not another city, but The City. A city which would be all that Ur could never be. A city with solid foundations like no other, a city that had God as its architect and builder. To Abraham this city was more 'real' than any earthly city. He hungered for a security which could be found in God alone. Henceforth he would put his confidence not in the works of the earth but in heavenly things. There is a worldly-wise saying that suggests that a man or woman can become so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use; the opposite is the more pressing danger. If we would become Friends of God we will need to become those who have discovered that heaven is more 'real' than earth, and live our lives on earth with the hourly expectation that heaven will break through.

The sacred record comes to its end with the book of Revelation and human destiny finds its consummation in a breathtaking vision. The translations do not do full justice to John's words; and I John saw The City, the Holy One, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [Revelation 21:2] A city, not prepared to withstand attack, but prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; she will find her consummation not in the defiant arrogance of self-sufficiency but in the submission of love.

I heard it testified of a man that of all men he would find transition to heaven the least difficult. Surely, these are the men (and women) of whom God will say, Welcome, My Friend. Abraham looked forward to The City, for the whole of his pilgrimage. The hope and expectation sustained him, and the day came when a single next-step carried him through its open gates. As the New Year opens may we walk its days with such consciousness of heaven's nearness that we feel the very next step may see us home. Have a blessed 2004.

## Chapter 06

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter One: Beginnings

Thy prayer was heard

The story of Abraham's family begins with a little list of sons and daughters which comes to an abrupt stop; but Sarai was barren she had no child. Perhaps it's something to do with the wonder of the inspired scripture but as I read the words, 40 centuries later, I can still feel the pain. She lives in the bosom of her family, in relative prosperity. She is a handsome woman with a loving husband. What more could she want? But Sarai was barren she had no child.

The book of Proverbs has lots of lists too. It lists four unquenchable hungers; things which cannot be satisfied or put off. Four hungers which know no rest and no respite; the grave, the barren womb, the parched earth, the raging fire. [Proverbs 30:16] The insistence of these four submits to no reason. In Sarah this unsatisfied longing was to lead to a short term compromise whose repercussions are with us 40 centuries later, but that is farther into our story. Sarah's hunger led her to the conclusion that 'something must be done' not realising, as Oswald Chambers said, that despair is ever the gateway of faith. It seems to me that frustration is always a call to prayer, never to action. Achievements motivated by frustration always carry bitter seeds. My soul, wait thou in silence for God only; For my expectation is from him. [Psalms 65:2 ASV]

The relatively new Hebrew word "frustration" did not appear in Hebrew until the mid-seventies, and in fact, before it was absorbed into the language, people who spoke only Hebrew were never "frustrated". They may have been "angry" or "disappointed" or they may have experienced a sense of turmoil in certain situations, but the acute feeling of frustration itself was unknown to them until the word for it was translated from the English language. Sometimes it is good to force ourselves to use a different word. If we were not allowed to use the word 'frustration' and had to use another in its place we might make an interesting discovery. 'Frustration' always has a solution as long as someone else will do something. "I am frustrated, and it is his fault." If I force myself to use the word 'angry' or 'disappointed' it opens up another solution; I am the problem. Christians have an alternative spelling for 'disappointment', they change the 'd' to an 'H'. Frustration is usually just a sign that God is not allowing me to be god, and I am discovering that I don't like the idea.

There are a surprising number of stories in the Bible relating to childlessness. When God introduced Himself to Moses He called Himself the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Did you notice that each one of these men had a wife who was barren? Was this part of the pain that caused them to seek God? We subsequently read that the sons of both Rebekah and Rachel were born in direct answer to prayer. [Genesis 25:21, 30:22] but what of Sarah? Did she pray? Did Abraham? And when you have prayed, what do you do then?

There is a wonderful illustration of answered prayer in Luke's gospel. The issue was the same; childlessness. Zechariah and Elizabeth have the greatest marriage testimony in scripture. They were both righteous before God, walking in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. [Luke 1:6] This would be exceptional if it referred to one person, but this verse plainly says both. Their walk together would have begun when they were young folk in the hills in Judaea. Their marriage would have been accompanied by prayer for children and Elizabeth would have breathed her silent amens. As the early years passed well meaning friends would have offered their condolences; don't worry dear, it will be alright, you wait and see. And they did wait, and the years passed, and more years passed.

Through all these years of heartache, and it had other painful connotations in their culture, they maintained their walk in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. They never became hard and critical, never became bitter, just kept on walking in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. What a pair! At some point in their long wait Zechariah had prayed. Of course, he had prayed often, but there was one particular time he prayed... How do I know? Because of Gabriel's word to him; 'Fear not, Zacharias, for thy prayer was heard, and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear a son to thee, and thou shalt call his name John. [Luke 1:13 Literal] This is a reference to a single prayer that was heard sometime in the past.

I have no doubt that Zechariah knew exactly which prayer Gabriel was referring to. I suppose that at some point he had poured his heart out to God. He had known it was different, that he had 'got through'. Perhaps he returned and kept the secret in his heart, and the years passed, and more years passed. And the memory grew dim, and they both were now well stricken in years. The last hopes faded and still they walked in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. When God hears prayer He doesn't always change things immediately, but change they will... in His way and in His time.

Sometimes as we pray we know that our prayer is heard. To continue to pray when we know the prayer has been heard would be pointless. Worse, we could conceivably pray ourselves from faith back into unbelief. There is no longer a need to pray when the prayer is heard. Now all that is needed is patient waiting upon God. This was Elijah's pattern. He prayed once but sent his servant seven times, and while the servant was to-ing and fro-ing Elijah was waiting upon God, his face between his knees.

So what are your secret sorrows? From the outside all looks well and all your peers are impressed but deep within you have those continuing hungers. Child of God lay hold of God in prayer, let the tears flow, be honest, tell Him how you feel; God cannot change the person you are pretending to be! But when you know He has heard, stop pestering Him. Trust it all into His hands. Hold it before Him in expectation. David's simple testimony was this poor man cried, and the LORD heard him. [Psalms 34:6] It was from the pain and joy of her own experience that Elizabeth was able to bring a unique encouragement to a young woman who had just begun to carry an amazing promise; And blessed is she that believed; for there shall be a fulfilment of the things which have been spoken to her from the Lord. [Luke 1:45]

## Chapter 07

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Two: The Blessing

back on the flight path

It is time now to examine the Blessing. Thus far we have identified Abraham as an ordinary man who became an extraordinary man. He was born into no special family and had no special advantages but he is a man with an amazing destiny. My purpose in making such a leisurely start has been to emphasise that in choosing Abraham God did not choose a star or a man with all the right qualifications. What God has done once He can do again, and what He has done with one He can do with another. Why not you, why not now?

Let's see if we can reconstruct the events of the Blessing. We have two accounts and we shall see if we can combine them to discover the original scenario. One of the questions we must answer is "Was there one call, or two". Where was Abraham living when God pronounced this blessing? Was it in Ur of the Chaldees or 600 miles to the North West, in Haran?

Stephen tells us plainly that it was in Ur that God appeared to Abraham. And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell. [Acts 7:2-4] A careful examination of Stephen's words will show that this is not the promise of blessing that we find in Genesis 12 but a series of separate commands; Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. It links very neatly with the letter to the Hebrews where an important truth is almost lost by the position of a verb. The KJV says By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. [Hebrews 11:8 KJV] The verb is pushed to the end of the sentence. The original word order is captured much better in the NKJV By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called... The first word to Abraham was not the promise of a blessing but a command to obey; faith is necessary for such obedience. This was not a conditional promise, it was a non-conditional command; and Abraham obeyed. So too pilgrims in our own age must bow the knee to become heirs of the promise, And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent [Acts 17:30]. God's first word to us is a command not a promise and all men, everywhere, doesn't leave many escape clauses.

I suspect that the best known translations of Genesis 12:1 have based their translation on evidence gathered from Acts 7 and have Now the LORD had said. This had said pushes the next

verses back to Ur, but there is no real reason to have translated it like this. It simply says as in the ASV Now Jehovah said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed. So Abram went, as Jehovah had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. When did God say this? Well, the end of this section has the location as Haran. In other words this is a second encounter. The first was a revelation of God in Ur of the Chaldees with a command, the second is a word which comes to Abraham years later and one which adds a series of blessings to the original series of commandments. The first half of the message is a repeat of the original, but the second part is just full of 'blessing'.

If this scenario is true we can construct an interesting history for Abraham. Abraham's departure from Ur was triggered by the circumstances of his father's migration AND by a clear word of command from God who appeared to him. Terah was heading for Canaan; Abraham had no idea where he was going, but went anyway. When the clan arrived at Haran they settled down. Later Haran is referred to as the city of of Nahor [Genesis 24:10]; that branch of the family had found all they wanted in Haran and saw no need to further their journey. Terah died here. The story could well have died here too except that Abraham had a second encounter with God who reminded him of the original command and added that series of amazing blessings; and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

This is enough for Abraham. He loads up and moves on, leaving Haran behind. The truth that excites me in this account is what we might call the gospel of the second chance. Now, I know that evangelicals can get very worried about that kind of language, but what I mean is simply the truth captured in Jonah 3. Jonah had 'blown it'; he was the 'prodigal' prophet. The consequence had been ejection into the storm and finally a place in the stomach of a great fish. When you have 'blown it' do you ever feel 'down in the mouth'? No-one was ever so 'down in the mouth' as Jonah! But what a prayer! When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD. [Jonah 2:7] The Prodigal Son came to himself, the prodigal prophet remembered the LORD. In Jonah chapter 3 the story just flows on without a break and with the words And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time. Oh Hallelujah, this is the God of all grace, Who comes the second time.

GREAT God of wonders! all thy ways

Display the attributes divine;

But countless acts of pardoning grace

Beyond thine other wonders shine:

Who is a pardoning God like thee?

Or who has grace so rich and free?

Perhaps someone who reads feels that they have 'blown it'. Prodigals! The Bible is full of them; prodigal sons, prodigal kings, prodigal wives, prodigal prophets, prodigal apostles. Men and women who started well; they began with such courage but somehow they find themselves in Haran, and the vision has dimmed. You were running well, who hindered you? Is it too late now? Not while we have a God who will speak the second time, and with such grace, adding to what He has already said. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him. [Genesis 12:4] So here he is, back on the flight path; a fresh start with even greater possibilities. My old Bible School principal used to say "can the bird with the broken wing ever fly as high again?" then he would pause, smile and say "no... higher!"

## Chapter 08

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Two: The Blessing

Be thou a blessing.

It is wonderful to consider the way in which God, who measures the cosmos with a single span, is able and willing to focus on a single individual. I sometimes think of it as one of those 'zooming in' sequences we see in films and adverts. This is one of the wonders of the Bible revelation of God. Some religions have a god who is so transcendent that nothing on earth touches Him; one worldwide religion teaches that if the whole world were saved it would give God no pleasure, and if the whole world were lost He would shed no tears. Some religions teach that god is constantly 'under our feet'; he is everywhere, in every stone and stream and must be placated with careful sacrifice and ritual. The Bible teaches that God is, at one and the same time, Transcendent and Immanent. (immanent means 'permanently everywhere', imminent means 'about to happen'.) Although the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him, He holds all things in His hands, and, at the same time, He is here. Go on, tell yourself some truth, speak the words, "He is here".

Abraham was a descendent of Shem and hence Semitic. He was also a descendent of Eber and hence Hebrew. [Genesis 11:10,15, 26] However, there was nothing inherently remarkable about Abraham, until God chose Him. It seems that when God embarks upon a campaign of reclamation He always chooses a human beachhead. My dictionary tells me that a beachhead is 'a military term for a fortified position established on a beach by landing forces'. When God was about to reclaim the human race in the days of Genesis 6, He chose 'a fortified position' who we know better as Noah. In Noah, God had landed. God re-peopled the earth from this 'fortified position' and the immediate danger of a world taken over by a race graphically described in Genesis 6:5 was averted... the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. What a terrible description... only evil, continually. Invariably, unendingly evil. The flood was an act of mercy for our race.

There is an important truth to grasp from the story of Noah and the Flood. God's covenant of salvation was made with Noah. Read Genesis 6-9 again, if possible in an archaic translation that will let you see the personal pronoun 'thou'. God's dealings were all with Noah. God's covenant of salvation was with Noah personally. All those who enjoyed that salvation are described by their relationship to Noah himself; Noah, Noah's wife, Noah's sons, the wives of Noah's sons. Everything hinges on Noah. God's promises are to Noah but those who are rightly related to Noah benefit from them.

God's purpose with Abraham was different, but he too would become God's beachhead. In Abraham, God had landed. God's promises to Abraham were all made to Abraham personally.

And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. [Genesis 12:2,3] We notice again that the blessings are all personal to Abraham and the relationship of others to Abraham will determine their destiny and their own blessing, or otherwise.

I wonder what Abraham made of the first part, I will make of thee a great nation. We need to put ourselves into Abraham's sandals and think what did he understand from this. How did he understand nationhood? How do we? In the 3rd Century BC the Old Testament was translated into Greek. For the Hebrew word 'nation' the Greek Septuagint translation used 'ethnos'. Ethnos can mean a nation state, but it can also mean a people bound together by a culture and history. I doubt that Abraham was thinking in terms of nation states and dynasties, but here was a promise that Abraham would not remain alone. Others would be added who would share his culture and history, and his destiny. Abraham's people ultimately would be identified by their trust in God and their abandonment to Him.

And what a wonderful word this is; I will bless thee. People can bless people; Melchizedek will bless Abraham, Jacob will bless Pharaoh, but what a promise this is that God would take personal charge of Abraham's blessing. We shall see Abraham later, turning from those who would bless him in earthly ways, lifting his hand and rejecting all riches that did not come from God. This is a challenge to our day. What do we want? Do we want blessing or do we want God's blessing? In some circles we hear that kind of language, "have you received the blessing?" What are we seeking, blessings or the Blessor?

The blessing continues with promises that God will make thy name great; literally I will cause it to grow. With God, growth is always more important than size. Growth is a sign of life, size is not. Consider the lilies, see how big they are? No, consider the lilies, how they grow. How do they grow, by the way? They abide in the place of their planting, and God brings everything necessary to them, in the place of their abiding. Strange, isn't it, that some people will cross oceans to get a blessing, when all they needed to do was abide in the place of God's choosing?

And the last personal word of the blessing? The KJV says and thou shalt be a blessing, but the ASV translators spotted something that they were able to capture in their version. They noticed that the mood of the verb was imperative; that is to say not a promise but a command. I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing. Abraham would be blessed. There was no doubt about it, but the ultimate purpose of Abraham's blessing was not his own personal benefit, but that he, in turn, would become a blessing... in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

He was to be God's beachhead; a fortified position established on a beach by landing forces. He was just the starting place for an amazing campaign of reclamation; so are you. The blessings that God brings into your life are not intended to make you a shining museum trophy. You are God's point of contact with those men and women around you. In you, God has landed. You are the way in which God has determined to bless men and men around you. It's the way we faith-sons of Abraham (of either gender), do things. It is part of our culture and history; it's the way we do things in our family.

be thou a blessing... in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

## Chapter 09

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Two: The Blessing

To serve and to guard

Let's continue a little on the theme of God's promise of blessing for and through Abraham.

We use it so often don't we? The word 'bless'? As a testimony; "The Lord blessed the meeting", "I was really blessed". Or an exclamation of gratitude; "Bless the Lord O my soul". Or a prayer; "Lord, bless this marriage". "God bless America". Have I ever stopped to ask, "what do I expect God to do in answer to this prayer?" Someone prayed for me, (by email!), just this morning; "Lord, Bless my friend Ron..." What am I asking for? If I don't know what I am asking for, how shall I recognise the answer when it comes?

There is principle of Biblical interpretation called The Law of First Mention. It says, and this is my expression of it, that the first time a word or theme is introduced in the Biblical revelation that context will give key elements of the truth which will be developed later in the Bible record. Let's try it out with the first mention of the idea of blessing;

Genesis 1:22 And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.

Genesis 1:28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

These two passages reveal that God intended blessing for the whole sentient creation, in earth and sky and sea. We see from Genesis 1:22 that to bless someone is not only to speak words, but to speak creative words. God's blessing is that He spoke fruitfulness into the creation and the creation heard and received His blessing. He not only created it with a word, but when it was created He spoke to it. It received not only life, but that life was commanded to flourish. Blessing is not aspiration, it is impartation. First existence, second communion. By communion I mean the creation became a co-worker with God, through the power imparted by His word. Every birth of every creature is the continuation of that blessing. This is a great wonder! When my boys were growing up I put up a poster in their bedroom showing the majesty of the Grand Canyon, written on it were the words 'to wonder is to begin to understand'. What a wonder our world is. When our minds touch the wonder of the creation, it is a small step for hearts to rise in gratitude and worship.

So the animal creation receives its blessing from God, and as an old friend of mine used to say 'when God blesses, folks stay blessed:'. It was not a passing excitement but an abiding change. The 'second blessing' is similar but wider. Mankind too is blessed by God; God speaks fruitfulness

into the human race. Its destiny is spoken into it; be fruitful, multiply, fill. These blessings are exactly the same as before but now repeated to this creature into which God breathed 'the spirit of lives' and who became a living soul. So every baby born is part of that blessing. Don't ever call yourself an unwanted baby; God wanted you. Don't ever call yourself an accident; you are part of God's original commission and gift to the human race. There may have been aspects of the coming together of a man and a woman which were not God's plan; immorality, promiscuity, violence. But the conception was a miracle and a proof of the continuation of our race's blessing. Your conception was a blessing, your birth was a blessing, your life is a blessing; all part of the one original blessing.

The blessing of the race has an extra element which does not appear in the blessing of the animal creation. Subdue the earth, have dominion. Sensitive folk have a problem with this word 'dominion'; they link it in their minds with tyranny, and words like dominating and domineering. Sin has made it almost impossible for us to get the right feel for this word. Let's see if we get to the sense of it. This phrase subdue the earth, have dominion... has a definition in Genesis 2:15; And Jehovah God taketh the man, and causeth him to rest in the garden of Eden, to serve it, and to keep it. [Young's Literal Translation] God commissioned Adam 'to serve and to guard'. (Isn't that the motto of some law enforcement agency?) The KJV and most of the later translations use the word 'to till', but this is interpretation not translation. The Hebrew word is 'abad' and is the word that the Hebrew word 'ebed' – servant derives from. Adam was being given authority to serve and care; his 'rule' was not to be for his own benefit but for the benefit of those over which he had been given dominion.

This is God's special blessing to the human race. It has God's full authority to serve and to care for God's creation. This is not man's creation and we have no rights over it, but we do have a profound responsibility for it. There is a New Testament passage which captures perfectly the kind of authority that God gives; Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. [Acts 20:28] and another, But Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. [Mark 10:42-44] (However did we allow all these Gentile power structures to get into the Church?) In my middle twenties I was inducted as the 'pastor' of a local church. A good friend defined my role as a shepherd; lead, feed, bleed. Take heed to thyself, lead in pursuing God. Feed the flock. No matter what the cost.

At one time Israel knew this was how God saw things. The Bible's earliest parable is the parable of Jotham. [Judges 9:7-15] Jotham knew that the role of the Olive Tree (an emblem of Israel) was to serve God and man, not to be promoted over the other trees. God's men are never over other men. Alas Israel forgot and pursued God with a prayer to be like the other nations. In came the Gentile power structures and, ultimately, out went the blessing.

So Adam's extra blessing was the imparting of all that he needed to fulfil this role. In Genesis 1:28 it sounds like a blessing, in Genesis 2:15 it sounds like a command. There is no difference; all God's commands have built-in blessings. Adam, like Abraham later, was hearing God say, "I will

bless thee... be thou a blessing". Only the blest can become blessings. Paul says "I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered". We must have received something, before we have something to give. A man with a rich friend asked, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him." [Luke 11:6] This parable is often called the parable of the importunate friend. It should be called the parable of the man who had two friends; one with a need, and the other with the resource.

Abraham was to become the Friend of God. God would have to bring him to a place of personal dependence, where he realised that he 'had nothing to give'. In his pilgrimage through to that place of obedience and trust he would become God's Friend, and be perfectly placed to be a man with two friends; one, the nations, with an endless need but the Other, God Himself, with a limitless resource. How am I placed?

## Chapter 10

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Two: The Blessing

This is the way you shall bless

An excursus is an academic expression. It means a digression in the narrative; a detour. Most preachers use detours in the course of their preaching. Some exceptional preachers can actually start with a detour. Let's start with a detour.

I find my meditation is lingering on the thoughts of 'blessing'. For the people of Israel under the law (and for good Anglicans) 'The Blessing' could only mean one thing.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them:

"The LORD bless you and keep you;

The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you;

The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace."

"So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them." [Numbers 6:22ff]

These words can become so familiar that we miss the powerful implications of them. These words empowered the Levitical priesthood to impart God's blessing to His people. See the flow of the ideas, you do this and I will do this. This is the way you shall bless... ..and I will bless them. If certain people do certain things on earth it will have a guaranteed effect in heaven. You shall bless... and I will bless. Follow the movement in this verse;

1. God gives specific authority to certain people and then
2. they cause something to happen on earth
3. that causes something to happen in heaven
4. that causes something to happen on earth.

Ah, you say, but that was then...

Well, let's look at a New Testament equivalent. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. [Matthew 16:19] If certain people do things on earth

it will have a guaranteed effect in heaven; you shall...on earth, and it shall be...in heaven. Now think about the implications of this for a moment; a human being standing on earth, in a moment of time, can change heaven and eternity.

The tenses of this verse are mind-blowing; And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven. And whatever you bind on earth shall occur, having been bound in Heaven. And whatever you may loose on the earth shall be, having been loosed in Heaven. Green's Literal Translation. Follow the movement in this verse;

1. God gives specific authority to certain people and then
2. they cause something to happen on earth
3. that causes something to happen in heaven
4. that causes something to happen on earth.

It goes from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven, and from heaven back to earth again. I sometimes say that angels are the fastest creatures in the universe; [Ezekiel 1:14] says they run and return like a flash of lightning. (At a conservative reckoning that would put their speed at 372000 miles per second. I'm making a point, not setting up speed trials. As God sends them on their missions He says 'Go' and swoosh they are back, waiting for the next job.) But prayer is even faster; God says pray this and the instant you pray it I will do it.

'The Blessing' and the use of the 'keys of the kingdom of heaven' have exactly the same shape. It is this co-working together with God that is one of the great truths about prayer. Wesley was at his most Arminian when he said God does nothing but in answer to prayer, but there is a profound truth here. There are things that God has determined to do in certain ways, by certain people, and they will be done in His way or not at all. In Ezekiel He makes wonderful promises to the nation of Israel and then says Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them; I will increase them with men like a flock. [Ezekiel 36:37] This is God saying this is what I am going to do, and this is how I am going to do it; I am going to do it through your prayer.

But before we rush out to try it, we need to observe my oft-repeated phrase 'certain people'. This is not something that anyone can do at any time. Only specifically authorised people can act for God in blessing and prayer; Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel'... Or people like Peter who have received personal revelation of the Christ and whose lives are rightly related to the Builder, and to whom the Lord can say "I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou..." These are not generalisations but specific authorisation.

Here's a detour from a detour... The priests underwent a specific placing in their roles which is a picture of regeneration. [Lev 8] The mediator of the covenant (Moses for the Old Covenant/Jesus for the New. Read Lev 8 and see how the Mediator is responsible for this whole process) stripped them to the skin and bathed them in the laver. [Titus 3:5] Then he clothed them and sprinkled them with blood and oil. [Luke 24:49] Then he filled their hands with bread. [Luke 11:8] Then they shared a meal in communion with each other and with the High Priest. Then they remained in the presence of God for seven days and seven nights; 24x7 God-consciousness. These, and none

other, were the men who were authorised to bless in the name of Jehovah.

Or men like Abraham, a man who the Lord will take and strip of every earthly confidence and resource. A man who will be brought to the place where God is his only defence and treasure. A man who will be trained to hear the voice of God. A man who will be brought into the covenant of a living communion with God. A man who will bear the pain of God's choices in his life. A man who can become a blessing to others, because he is a man under authority. A man whose loyalties are so undivided that the Lord can say of him...“Abraham, my Friend”.

These are the men and women who will pray on earth and bring down heaven's blessing. The early Church were such, as Charles Wesley told in one of his hymns;

On God they cast their every care,

Wrestling with God in mighty prayer

They claimed the grace through Jesus given,

By prayer they shut, and opened heaven.

## Chapter 11

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Two: The Blessing

Face to face

I'm still thinking about The Blessing. I have been trying to define blessing by subtraction. In other words, what is the essence of blessing? This is how I have been thinking. I am blessed, what would I need to lose before I could no longer say I am blessed? I have my food and shelter; would I still be blessed if these were taken away? Yes, I would. I have my wife and family; would I still be blessed if these were taken away? Yes, I would. I have a revelation of His truth and a work to do; if these were taken away would I still be blessed? Yes, I would. What if God were to be taken away? Would I still be blessed? No, I would not.

It seems to me that the essence of blessing is the presence of God. Moses certainly thought so. Moses had pleaded with God and Israel had been spared. God repeated His promise to Moses. He would give them the land He had promised, He would send an angel in front of them to drive out the enemy, He would cause them to inherit a land that flowed with milk and honey. [Ex 33:1-3] and then God 'dropped the bombshell'. " I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people..." God repeats all his promises to them and then adds but I'm not coming with you. What an astonishing statement. Apparently, you can have promises fulfilled, receive an inheritance by faith, know constant victory in all your conflicts, live a life full of every provision... and not have God with you. This is a sobering concept. We live in an age when some Christian groups can 'guarantee' all these blessings, and see their acquisition as absolute 'proof' that what they say is God's truth. But here is a terrible prospect; you can have all these things and be without God's presence.

God effectively disowned Israel at this point; the LORD said unto Moses, Depart, and go up hence, thou and the people which thou hast brought up out of the land of Egypt. Not 'My people, Israel' but the people which thou hast brought up out of the land of Egypt .[Ex 33:1]

The people of Israel were devastated by this information; they acted out their mourning, stripping off their ornaments. They were a people bereaved; potentially, they had lost God. [Ex 33:8] They watched with bated breath as Moses stepped into the privacy of a temporary tabernacle and sought the LORD; the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend. [Ex 33:11] (Not only Abraham, but Moses too, was God's Friend.) Moses pleads with his Friend; Moses has nothing to set before the people of Israel, but he pleads for God to be gracious. His prayer is wonderful. He pleads with God to be gracious because he has no other basis for his plea. And his final plea is Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation is thy

people. His final plea in this prayer is LORD, recognise Israel again as your own people.

His petition is granted; My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest. [Ex 33:14] Literally, My face shall accompany thee. This is a Hebrew idiom; the face, *paniym*, means the presence. The word is used over 2000 times in the Hebrew Bible; usually in our translation it is translated 'before' meaning 'in the presence of'. It is a powerful picture that runs through the Bible and through many cultures. "we really see eye to eye", " he wouldn't look me in the face", "the LORD talked to Moses face to face, (*paniym* to *paniym*) as a man speaketh unto a friend". It has to do with eye-contact; people comfortable in each other's company. This was the purpose of the central ritual of Israel's priesthood, the Day of Atonement. Its purpose was to make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before (*paniym*) the LORD. [Ex 16:30] It was to ensure that sin was put away so that God would remain 'present' with His people.

Moses' wonderful petition is granted; the LORD will keep His tabernacle in the midst of theirs; He will keep His face towards them. But to me, it is Moses' reply that sets him apart as a man of great insight and personal devotion to God. We need to remember that this is a friend talking to a Friend. He says, If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? is it not in that thou goest with us? so shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth. [Ex 33:15,16] Moses says, in effect, if You are not coming with us leave us here, nothing else matters. There is no arrogance or disrespect here but he is speaking, as a man does to his friend, Moses says 'who cares about the promised land? Who cares about victory and wealth and health?' And then he makes this amazing statement that the thing which distinguishes Israel as God's people is not any by-product blessings. ? so shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth. The thing which distinguishes them as God's people, as being different to all others, is God's presence. This is God's authentic signature on His own; His presence.

The greater the experience, the greater the danger of reliance upon it. Israel had had some amazing experiences. They had been through flood and fire. They had seen God move on their behalf in great power. They had sealed the covenant. And yet if Moses is right, the thing which sets them apart is not their history but their present. Their distinctiveness, as the people of God, depended not only upon their historical experience but on their 'present tense' relationship with God.

Let's keep all this in mind as we return to the Blessing. Against the history of this close-run-thing where God almost disowned them comes the Levitical law with its offerings and sacrifices for sin. In Numbers, Israel is poised to start an eleven day journey to the promised land [Deuteronomy 1:2] They are God's people but need the continuance of His presence; this alone identifies them as God's own nation. So the priests are entrusted with the Triune Blessing of Numbers 6:22-27

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, In this way you shall bless the sons of Israel, saying to them:

The LORD bless you and keep you;

The LORD cause His face (paniym) to shine on you, and be gracious to you;

The LORD lift up His face (paniym) to you, and give you peace.

So they shall put My name on the sons of Israel, and I Myself will bless them.

This is a prayer for the continued presence of God among His people. It is the same prayer for grace and peace which is repeated at the beginning of every single letter of Paul and Peter in the New Testament. Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. [Colossians 1:2] All the other blessings can wait, God-consciousness is the foundation for all, or the building will become a magnificent ruin. There is no prayer for fruitfulness, or victory, or glory here; just a prayer for God's presence. There have been many definitions of revival; how about this one? God is here, among his people. [1 Corinthians 14:25] At one of the annual conventions of the early Methodists the delegates had been sharing the victories of the cross throughout the land. It was a time of great blessing, but John Wesley put it all into perspective when he said "and best of all, God is with us".

Now think about the final promise in Numbers 6:27; So they shall put My name on the sons of Israel, and I Myself will bless them. Did you ever have something which was precious to you? Did you put your name on it to tell all the world that it was yours? This is how the priests of old were to put God's name on the sons of Israel, by invoking His presence. He blessed them with His presence and that was The Blessing. God puts His seal/signature on His people. Grace and peace is His signature; it says 'this is mine'. But then grace and peace are not detachable; they are the consequence of His presence, by His Spirit. And ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God doth dwell in you; and if any one hath not the Spirit of Christ—this one is not His;[Romans 8:9 YLT]

What are we seeking? Blessing? Provision? Revival? That was a wise man who testified; When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek. [Psalms 27:8]

My goal is God Himself, not joy, nor peace;

Nor even blessing, but Himself, my God.

'Tis His to lead me there, not mine but His...

At any cost, dear Lord, by any road.

So faith bounds forward to its goal in God,  
and love can trust her Lord to lead her there.

Upheld by Him, my soul is foll'wing hard,  
Till God hath full fulfilled my deepest prayer.

No matter if the way be sometimes dark,  
No matter though the cost be oft-times great,  
He knoweth how I best shall reach the mark,

The way that leads to Him must needs be straight.

One thing I know, I cannot say Him nay;

One thing I do, I press on towards my Lord.

My God, my Glory here from day to day,

And in the glory there, my Great Reward.

## Chapter 12

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Three: Entering the land

Shechem

Time to move on, I think. It is one thing to come out, but quite another to enter in. Later in Israel's history there was a whole generation that came out, but never entered in. God's intention is always to bring us in, and He only brings us out because He wants to bring us in. Are you still following this? One of the descriptions of the child of God is found in Colossians 1:14 who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love. Many want to live on the borders and to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, but God cannot begin His new work until He has brought the old to an end.

Our narrative continues; And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came. And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. Genesis 12:5,6 He is actually in the promised land now but doesn't know it. Sometimes it is like this in our experience. A single step takes us into new territory but we don't realise it until God reveals it. Many years later Abraham's grandson had the same experience; Surely the LORD is in this place and I knew it not. [Genesis 28:16] Our responsibility is to take the next step; it is God's prerogative to show us its significance.

It is easy to miss what is happening here. Abraham is travelling on, not knowing whither; he still doesn't know where he is going. God has told him to travel and in his obedient travelling he just 'happens' to come to Shechem. He knows nothing of the significance of this place until he receives a further revelation of God Himself. If my count is correct, this is the second vision of God. The first was in Ur of the Chaldees. [Acts 7] The word of God has come since, but no further vision. He obeys the word and it results in a vision. This pattern is worth noting. Some spend their lives waiting for a life's vision but it may be that the vision cannot be given to you in Haran, or whatever place you have paused in. There is no point in pleading for a vision; you must obey the word now, step by step, until God brings you to the place where He can reveal Himself again. There is often a weary slog between visions, but this is where character is shaped, not in the spectacular interruption but in the step by step obedience.

Finally, Abraham and his party arrive in Shechem. Take a moment to see this in your mind's eye. This has been a long journey in miles and time. Abraham doesn't realise it but he has arrived in the valley of decision. Shechem is a level plain between two small mountain tops; Ebal and Gerizim. Ebal and Gerizim are about one and half miles apart at their peaks, but only 500 yards

apart at their bases. From the valley floor Gerizim rises by 800 feet and Ebal by 1000 feet; from their peaks can be seen most of the promised land. Almost 500 years after Abraham's visit a whole nation would gather on these hillsides in obedience to God's word and would hear Joshua cry "choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah." [Joshua 24:15]

There are places in a nation's history which have great emotional significance. There is a seaside town in Northern France, on the English Channel, called Dunkirk, but there is a whole generation of British folks for whom Dunkirk will never mean a summer holiday spot. Dunkirk is not only a geographical location it is a vital point of history in a nation's memory. There are others; the Alamo, Gallipoli, Normandy, Guadalcanal. These are not geographical locations but markers in a nation's psyche. The very mention of these names has the power to trigger powerful emotions. God gave Israel a history rich in such places.

Shechem is the valley of decision. 2000 years after Abraham there was another encounter in this valley; "he left Judea, and departed again into Galilee.

"And he must needs pass through Samaria. So he cometh to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near to the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph: and Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour. There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink." [John 4:4-7]. Sychar is Shechem; for an uncircumcised Hebrew, for God's own nation, for a despised Samaritan woman with a dark personal history, Shechem is the valley of decision. For you and me too, we must make our way to some spiritual Shechem and hear in our spirit's the voice of Joshua-Jesus crying "choose ye, this day whom ye will serve." And we will have to voice our own response "as for me...".

In this valley of decision God appears to Abraham and speaks to him. For the first time in our narrative God makes a promise of inheritance. Abraham is in his mid-seventies [Genesis 12:4] when he receives this promise. It is easy to miss the fact that according to what we know of this story God had not promised the land until this time. We presume that God made these promises in Ur of the Chaldees, but an examination of the record shows that God only commanded Abraham to travel to a land of God's choosing. There was no promise of land until he stood on it and even then it was a promise not to Abraham but to his progeny; thy seed.

Abraham's response is significant. He does not call a celebration but builds an altar. What instinct taught this man that sacrifice would become such a vital element of his life for the fulfilment of God's promise? There is something about the building of an altar that is very deliberate. This is no rush of emotion with an instant decision; it is the declaration of a steady intention that the altar will be at the centre of his relationship with God. It takes time to build an altar. We shall watch Abraham pitching his tent and building his altars. Notice the transitory things and the permanent in his life. This world was not his home, he was just passing through but the principle of the altar is a permanent feature.

If someone tried to track my life I wonder what would they use as markers? Successful projects, mega-churches, religious institutions, books, denominations? What shall we leave behind? If they

tried to track Abraham's life they would have had to follow his altars. No institutions, no temples, just altars and ashes which testified that "Abraham passed this way". In the UK they put blue metal plates on walls to mark that some famous person lived here, God's men just leave ashes. A testimony which says 'a fire once burned in this place' for God.

If we are going to become friends of God, we shall have to come to our Shechem and choose 'whom we will serve'. And our service will not be measured by human units of measurement, but by our surrender, by the laying down of our lives in grateful sacrifice to the God who has appeared to us. This is authentic worship, a willing surrender. In my mind's eye I can see him. He has gathered a few stones together and kindled a fire. He has chosen a lamb from his flock and its life has trickled into the flame. Now he places the lifeless carcass into those flames. Nothing will be spared. This is Abraham's substitute for himself. This is not sacrifice for sin, but a life yielded utterly to God. The flames spit and flare, the smoke rises into the blue skies between Ebal and Gerizim, there is no way back. In the valley of decision, Abraham has made his choice.

## Chapter 13

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Three: Entering the land

Passing through, going on still...

Abraham is on the move. And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem. [Genesis 12:6] he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent. [Genesis 12:8] And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south. [Genesis 12:9] The pattern is established; we are following the steps of the faith of our father Abraham. [Romans 4:12] Faith is often pictured as big leap into the unknown, more often it is just another step. And then another, and then another. This is the pattern observed in Hebrews By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: [Hebrews 11:9] Abraham is on the move; it is an integral part of his story that he never settled for what he had experienced. For many faith is a crisis-event, and many a movement with a vision becomes a monument with an epitaph.

A man once had a blessed experience. He determined to hold on to it and wrote it out so as not to lose any precious part. He kept the document in his desk draw and when he was low in spirit he would re-read his 'blessed experience'; it was a comfort to him. On occasion he read his 'blessed experience' to friends who were also comforted. When friends in need came to his home his instinct was to open the draw, pull out his 'blessed experience' and read it to his visitor. He developed quite a ministry with his 'blessed experience'. One day he opened the drawer and pulled out a handful of confetti; his 'blessed experience' had been eaten by mice. It is all too easy to end up with a 'mouse-eaten blessed experience'. The greater the experience the greater the danger; the brass serpent became a snare to Israel and they worshipped it. When I was a very young Christian friends would say 'Have you got your Baptism yet?' This is dangerous theology. Have you arrived? Can you tick the box? Have you had your Shechem, your Bethel? Good, now get up and press on; there's more. There's always more.

This is one of the dangers of denominationalism. They secure a blessing at great cost to the first generation; the second generation comes along and builds a wall around it to keep it safe. Over time the preoccupation is more and more elaborate defence of the 'blessing'. People are then excluded who will not man the defences to safeguard the 'blessing'. God's men and women are not settlers, they are frontiersmen. And this is no 'five year mission to boldly go' this is a lifetime commitment to follow where He leads. One old puritan used to pray 'Lord, if you see me in danger of nesting, put a thorn in my nest'. Ah, you say, but aren't there times when we need to consolidate. No, we never need to consolidate; only people who are intending to stay somewhere need to consolidate. Only people with a strategy need time to consolidate; pilgrims don't have a strategy. People who plan for the future need time to consolidate; sojourners are

one-day-at-a-time people.

This is a wonderful description of David in the Acts; For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep, and was laid unto his fathers, and saw corruption: [Acts 13:36] We only have one generation to serve; this one. We can only serve this generation by doing the will of God; nothing else will serve them. We have all the time we need to do all that we are supposed to do. When it is done, leave it alone, go to sleep! Leave it; it's no longer your responsibility. Isn't this ir-responsibility? No, this is His-responsibility. Listen to Paul, his life's work is about to fall apart, as men would judge it; For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. [2 Timothy 1:12] We do well to note the emphasis here; I know whom I have believed... and he is able to guard that. My responsibility is to believe Him, the person, His responsibility is to guard that, the thing that I have done and committed to Him.

Paul's earlier advice to Timothy touches the same theme. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee. [1 Tim 4:14-16].

Paul draws Timothy's attention to the need for progress rather than achievement; thy profiting/progress. Men are fatally results orientated; God is progress orientated. He is not interested in how many boxes we can tick, but in how many steps we have taken. The word profiting/progress in the original language is prokopE; it is an interesting word with at least two derivations. The prefix pro as in prototype means before, or forwards. koptO is to strike a blow.

One derivation is of a metal-smith beating a piece of metal to extend its length, the other is pioneers beating a path in front of the army. Both are powerful images. Blow by blow the master craftsman shapes the metal to his design and the watcher sees the increasing conformity of the metal to the will of the craftsman. So you who would be 'leaders', let the progress of the work under the master's hand be seen. The greatest gift you can give to those who follow is for them to see the ongoing work of God in your life. We are His workmanship. [Ephesians 2:10] In you the heavenly Bezaleel [Ex 31:1-5] is creating His masterpiece; let men see His work and marvel.

The second derivation is of a pioneer beating (koptO) a way before (pro) an army, and so furthering its advance. Step by step and blow by blow they make a way for others to follow. This links with the admonition of Hebrews 'whose faith follow'. Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. [Hebrews 13:7,8] It is not their exploits which are set before our eyes but their faith. The 'end' or 'goal' of their lives was ever increasing likeness to Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today and forever. It is safe to follow such men. We are not to try to replicate their deeds, but we are to repeat their steps of faith.

Some years ago I visited Lincoln College in Oxford, John Wesley was a tutor there and they have recreated an impression of his study. A stable door enables a visitor to lean over and be 'in' the

study without damaging the floor boards and furniture. There is a visitors' book too where you can list your name and add a comment. I thought for a moment and in the comments column I wrote "do it again, Lord". I had no sooner written the words when in my spirit I heard the Lord say "I am the Origin and all my works are original, I never repeat myself". His works will change; His character, never.

How shall we behave as Abraham's children? How shall we show the family likeness? It is not outward conformity to Abraham that the master-craftsman is creating but a inward likeness of disposition. Abraham is learning to 'pass through'. His goal is not a geographical or spiritual map reference-point; his goal is that city whose architect and builder is God. My old preacher-friend once told me "if you can just live long enough, you will see everything... twice!" He was referring to 'trends' and 'fads' in Christianity; shepherding theology, manifested sons, end times scenarios. They come and go and come again and go again. These 'current phases' of Christianity can be useful in drawing our attention to long forgotten truths, but "blessed is the man or woman who learns to 'pass through'" and doesn't get stuck in some theme or emphasis. For the children of Abraham, balance is not found in a carefully held position but in continuing movement.

As we have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so let us walk in him... [Colossians 2:6] Being ready always in heart for the next step, raise your Ebenezer, and then ...walk on. There is more, always more...

## Chapter 14

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Three: Entering the land

Calling upon the Name

So Abraham, ever moving on, pitches his tent in between Bethel and Ai and builds an altar to Jehovah, and called upon the name of Jehovah. [Genesis 12:8] Let's not try to fit this into an evangelical scenario but simply read what we find. We are watching God's preparation of a Praying Man and we shall see one of the most elemental lessons here. This is Abraham's first recorded prayer; he called upon the name of Jehovah. God has already initiated three meetings and we have seen Abraham's faith in his responses; by faith he obeyed, by faith he wandered, but now without any apparent revelation of God he builds his altar and lifts his voice in prayer. Man without prayer is an atheist, irrespective of his theology. Abraham has received revelations and promises but there has been no reference to his prayer. What instinct caused him to 'call upon the Name of Jehovah' at this point in his pilgrimage?

This Bible phrase is important. After all, the Lord is rich unto all that call upon Him. For whosoever shall call upon the Name of the Lord shall be saved. [Romans 10:12,13] Is this then the point of Abraham's 'salvation'? How we evangelicals love to put things into little boxes. It saves time of course; "what denomination do you belong to?" When I have your answer to this question I can put you into one of my little boxes without having to think about you; think of all the time that saves! "What experiences have you had?" Now, I can measure your progress. God forgive us, we have created 'assembly-line' Christianity. God deals with hand-crafted masterpieces not mass-produced replicas. I sometimes think we want people to agree to our scenarios for our peace of mind rather than theirs. God's 'three steps to salvation' may turn out to be ten and in quite a different order to what the evangelist told us to expect.

What is Abraham's experience thus far? Abraham has become God-conscious. He is captured and offers up his life in the symbol of burnt offerings. He has received guidance and promises. Now he comes to a recognition of his vulnerability. He has pitched his tent between Beth-el and Ai; between the 'House of God' and the 'Heap of Ruins'. These are the meanings of the words. At some point in our lives, for some sooner, for some later, we all pitch our tent here and the possibility of two quite different destinies occurs to us. Will I offend your theological position if I tell you even when you have become God-conscious, captured, guided and the holder of great promises, there are still two possible destinies before you? Where shall I spend my future? In the House of God or on the heap of ruins? This realisation will bring fear and it is intended to do so.

Let's take a look at a couple of examples of 'calling upon the Name of the Lord'. Let's try that rule of 'first mention' again. Does the first Bible reference give us some clues to how this theme will

develop? And to Seth, to him also there was born a son; and he called his name Enos: then began men to call upon the name of the LORD. [Genesis 4:26] Adam and Eve begat sons and daughters [Genesis 5:7] but we only have the history of those who were significant in the unfolding of the story of redemption; Cain, Abel, Seth. It must have been strange for Seth as he grew. Adam was 130 years old and would live for another 800; Abel was buried, Cain banished. Eden was only a memory; he had never seen it. The world in which he lived showed increasing signs of the curse under which Adam had brought it; Sin had entered and Death had followed. When Seth was 105 he held his own son in his arms. What thoughts tumbled through his mind? It is one of the most profound experiences to hold your own flesh and blood in your arms; thrilling, awesome, frightening. "Frightening?" Yes, what kind of a world have I brought this vulnerable child into? A world filled with wonder and danger. What kind of future awaits my child? The safety of God's House or the ignominy of the Rubbish Heap? In any normal man there will rise the intention to protect at all cost, and the simultaneous realisation that so much is outside our mortal control; Enos means 'mortality'. If this child's welfare is beyond my power to whom can I turn for help? And to Seth, to him also there was born a son; and he called his name Enos: then began men to call upon the name of the LORD. The signs of the Ruin increasingly fill Seth's world; he lifts his heart to invoke the help of power beyond his own. It is hard to be an atheist with your baby in your arms.

Sometimes it's not the revelation of God or the promise that drives a man to prayer but the realisation of things as they really are. Prayer at its most basic is the mortal reaching out to the Divine; the finite reaching out to the Infinite. It is, at the same time, the most eloquent expression of our mortal vulnerability and our utter conviction that if we are to be safe we shall need the help of Another. This is what has happened to Abraham; he no longer feels 'safe' and he 'calls upon the Name of Jehovah'.

Let's take another example; The Name of the Jehovah is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe. The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit. [Proverbs 18:10,11] Solomon, the wisest of all men recognised that the greater the personal resource the greater the temptation to rely on it. Men seek for the safety of a good protective wall between them and the world's threats; the rich man thinks he has found it. He uses his wealth to insulate him from the threat of danger and 'ruin'. This 'wealth' may not be in dollars or pounds or yen; it may be his intelligence, his strength of character, his nationhood, his muscle, his family. Whatever the personal resource in which we place our confidence, it may seem as impenetrable as a 'high wall' but it is a 'conceit'. And a deadly conceit at that. There is only one safe place; the Name of the Lord is a strong tower. The 'safe/saved' man is the man who has learned to run into it; to call upon the Name of the Lord. The 'safe/saved' man is the man who is no longer building his own defences but who instinctively runneth into the provision made by Another.

The Hebrew word for 'safe' in Proverbs 18:10 means 'lifted up'. When my children were very small and their vocabularies were equally small they instinctively found a means of 'salvation'. If they found themselves vulnerable in the presence of a boisterous dog or unfamiliar surroundings they would pull on my trouser leg and say "Up, Daddy, Up". Is this vulnerability why we have to become children to enter the kingdom? Let me suggest a new, comprehensive, title for that passage of scripture we call the Beatitudes. How about 'Blessed are the Vulnerable for they shall be lifted to Safety'?

My children are grown up now; they call me 'Dad'. (I have to tell you I miss being called 'Daddy'; it was nice to be the hero for a while.) Names are important. Suppose you were to meet me and say 'Hi Ron' and I said 'Mr Bailey to you, only my friends call me Ron'. Could there be a more cruel put-down? You can feel the distance that would open up at such a response. Human beings have always known that personal names give a closer approach to someone. Pagans have long believed that you can manipulate 'god' if you can only find the right 'name'. (some 'Christian pagans' work on similar principles. If we can just find the right words/techniques we can manipulate God!) Abraham was learning to draw near and to address his friend by Name. The people of Israel were hesitant to use the name of Jehovah, lest over-familiarity led them into blasphemy. When they read the scriptures aloud they would substitute the name 'Jehovah/Yahweh' with the title Lord. The idea was carried into our old KJV so that when, in the OT, you find LORD spelled out in uppercase it is telling you that the proper name 'Jehovah' is being used. So even though the name 'Jehovah' is used over 7000 times in the Old Testament most readers of the KJV have hardly ever seen it.

It was not to all people that God revealed Himself as 'Jehovah', but particularly to Abraham and his descendants. Thomas Newberry said that the name has the significance of "He that always was, that always is, and that ever is to come" God's names are not labels; they are revelations of His character. Abraham called upon the God who had revealed Himself to Abraham; we cannot call upon the Name of the Lord without the Lord having revealed Himself to us. Beware then of the 'sinners' prayer'. God has not promised to 'save' the one who prays the sinners' prayer, or the one who responds to an altar call, or the one who makes his decision, or the one who gives himself to the Lord... He has, however, promised to save those who call upon the Name of the Lord. God revealed Himself under this Name and those who called upon this revealed God would be saved. Faith, as we have seen before, is response to revelation.

There is now another Name; a Name under which God has revealed Himself in even greater fullness than to Abraham and the saints of old. This is the Name above all Names; Jesus. It signifies all that 'Jehovah' meant but adds the word Saviour; Jesus means 'Jehovah's Salvation'. ...And now I can make you wiser even than Solomon... it is not only the 'righteous' that can run into this Name and be lifted to safety; the unrighteous can come too. If you have 'seen' who Jesus is and are aware of the 'mortal' danger in which you live, call, run...

Today is God's accepted time, today is the day of your salvation.

## Chapter 15

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Three: Entering the land

Still calling...

Let's linger a while on this theme of calling on the name of the Lord. Do you call on the name of the Lord? Notice, I didn't ask 'did you' but 'do you'. We'll take a look at this as the ongoing process rather than an initial crisis. Perhaps a word or two first about that 'crisis'. We all do come to a crisis and it is important that we do. It is a key work of God's Spirit to bring us to points of deliberate choice. Choose ye, this day, whom ye will serve. [Joshua 24:15] How different this demand is to most 'altar calls'. Mostly, the 'altar call' is focussed on sins forgiven, or heaven, or peace. The Bible's emphasis is quite different; whom will you serve. It is instructive to read Ananias' counsel to Paul. This is no 'sinner's prayer' but And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord. [Acts 22:16 ] There's that phrase again 'Calling upon the Name of the Lord'. At the risk of boring you, I repeat that this is not 'saying a prayer'; that can be a very cerebral activity. There is an urgency, a passion in 'calling on the name of the Lord' that is not necessarily present in someone who 'prays a prayer'. Something inside the man must reach out to God.

Let me illustrate what I mean from the Exodus story... And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. [Genesis 2:23,24] Are we 'sighing' or 'crying'? In our prayer for God to move in our communities are we 'sighing' or 'crying'? There is a strong temptation to 'sighing' as we grow older; "ah, I remember when..." There is no energy in 'sighing', no passion; it is fundamentally a complaint. Is it reading too much into the verse to say that God ignored their sighing but responded to their crying? I see that He responded to their 'groaning' too. (notice that was 'groaning, not moaning!'). Their condition had deteriorated generation by generation, and no doubt there were those who said 'it wasn't like this when I was a girl/boy." A sigh is passive and involuntary; a cry is active and deliberate. Salvation is not the result of passive consent but of active 'calling on the name of the Lord'. Its basis is not the passive 'receiving Jesus Christ as your Lord' but the desperate reaching out from inevitable destruction to the only possible deliverer. It comes, not as a result of explanation and persuasion but as a result of revelation. Wake up, stir yourself! God hears a 'cry'.

We shall see Abraham returning to the point of his crisis in a latter chapter, but I want to move from crisis to process. I wonder how you describe 'Christians'? There is an interesting description in the book of Acts; it is found on the lips of friend and foe. This is Ananias expressing his anxiety over Paul's conversion; And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy

name. [Acts 9:14 ] And this is the local synagogue congregation; But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? [Acts 9:21] They both describe 'Christians' as people who call on the Name. Ah, you say, that is just to distinguish them from the Jews. I wonder?

Paul's First Corinthians is addressed to the church in that city but not exclusively so. It is one of the few places where Paul's words show that he knew his letters were not just for a particular locality. Certainly, it is addressed to those 'called saints' at Corinth but he adds another group to his greeting; with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their and ours: [1 Corinthians 1:2] Did you know that if you are one of those that 'calls upon the name of Jesus Christ' this letter was addressed to you? Some expositors have concluded that some of the things Paul says in this letter were only for the Corinthians, but Paul knew from the beginning that others would be reading this letter; he addressed it to them. This letter is addressed to those that 'call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord' in Canada, the USA, Australia, Java, Bolivia, the UK. Put your own town in the verse; this was written for you... if you call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Most of the references to 'calling upon the name of the Lord' do have a focus on the crisis, but this verse brings out another truth. The verb used for 'call' is in a special form. For those who are interested, it is a present participle preceded by a definite article. (I bet that was a blessing!) Seriously, it is the way Greek shows not just an event but a characteristic. This letter is addressed to 'the ones calling upon the name of the Jesus Christ our Lord'. This is not just something they once did, but a description of their continual behaviour. Let me illustrate. I once won a bronze medal for old-time dancing! But no one who knows me would ever think of me as Ron the Dancer. It was an event, it never became part of my life; I haven't danced now for 50 years. First Corinthians is not written to people who 'called upon the name of the Jesus Christ our Lord' 50 years ago; it is written to people who are still 'calling upon the Name'. Are you one of those? Am I? Is Christianity an event or a way of life?

And this isn't the only time we find this emphasis; Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. [2 Timothy 2:22] This is the same grammatical construction. Even when God has made our hearts 'pure' the need remains the same; we are still to be those whose whole life is characterised by the fact that they are continually 'calling on the Lord'. And again; And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear: [1 Peter 1:17] Is there no end to this? Am I to spend my whole pilgrimage 'calling upon the name of the Lord'?

The writer to the Hebrews brings the same truth from another perspective; Wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. [Hebrews 7:25] This time the characteristic behaviour is not 'calling upon the Lord' but 'drawing near unto God through Him'. Is He able? That is the question; not do I believe in sanctification. Do I believe that 'as I continually draw near to God through Christ' He is able to save to the uttermost?

There is an interesting illustration of the way this works in Paul's decision to 'appeal to Caesar'. For if I be an offender, or have committed any thing worthy of death, I refuse not to die: but if there be none of these things whereof these accuse me, no man may deliver me unto them. I appeal unto Caesar. [Acts 25:11] This is exactly the same word that we have been following. A literal translation would be 'I call upon Caesar'. It is wonderful to trace the effect of this 'calling upon Caesar'. It had seemed that Paul's life was at the mercy of the mob, the Sanhedrin, the Procurator Festus, King Agrippa. From the moment of this 'calling upon Caesar' the whole might of the Roman Empire was marshalled to get him to Rome. No one else had any right to judge him or decide his fate; 'calling upon Caesar' had brought him under the personal jurisdiction of the Emperor. This is our confidence too; our continually 'calling upon the name of the Lord' is not a magic spell but it does keep us constantly under the jurisdiction of the Name. It is the absolute guarantee that we shall not fall into the hands of man or demon. Without His express permission they dare not interfere; all the might of the Empire is marshalled on our behalf. Makes you feel safe, doesn't it?

## Chapter 16

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Abraham, My Friend,

Chapter 4: Down into Egypt

Famine in the land.

“And there was a famine in the land.” [Genesis 12:10] Its one thing to progress when everything is going well, but what happens when the trials come? And come they will. Often they come in unexpected ways. Consider Abraham; his pilgrimage has brought him hundreds of miles. From Ur through to Haran and moving ever onwards, building his altars, calling upon the name of the Lord, and finally God is able to say “you are here” “this land” [Genesis 12:7]. No longer “the land that I will show thee”, but here it is... and “this land” will be the inheritance of your seed. Did you ever feel that you had arrived? Be vigilant; these are the times when the trials come.

“there was a famine in the land”. Yes, in the very “land” that Abraham had spent years traveling to; the very land that God had promised to his “seed”. Please notice how ‘matter of fact’ this sentence is; “And there was a famine in the land: And Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land.” [Genesis 12:9] It is all so perfectly natural. What else would you do? But it is the step ‘into the natural’ which is a step ‘out of the spirit’ and ‘into the flesh’. These logical conclusions and common-sense decisions can bring the work of God to a dead halt. Things begun in the Spirit will always be tempted to take the line of the flesh; the ordinary, the human. It is all too easy, when trials come, to ‘go down into Egypt’.

Of course, the temptation is always more subtle than a temptation to complete abandonment of the call of God. Notice that little word ‘sojourn’. A temptation to re-locate in Egypt would have been too blatant; Abraham would not have fallen for it. But the temptation is to ‘sojourn’; just a few days, only a spell, just while we sort out this famine problem. Does the language sound familiar? Karl Marx once said that ‘all compromise carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.’ This journey ‘down into Egypt’ was never viewed by Abram as a permanent solution, just a short-term expedient. Beware short-term expedients; they tend to have long term consequences.

The man or woman who God would teach to pray must develop the single eye. To the observer it may seem like ‘obsession’ but our lives are so easily diffused that God must focus them. Oswald Chambers remarked on this phenomena when he noted the way in which in new converts there is an instinct to cut off everything. Whatever you do, never ‘balance’ this instinct in the new convert. Let him respond to God in extravagant abandonment. It may be that later God will want to balance things and restore to the musician his guitar or to the artist her brush, but let God do it. Beware of being an ‘amateur providence’. Let them learn to hear the voice of God. Years later God would give specific permission for Jacob to go down into Egypt; “And God spake unto Israel in the visions of the night, and said Jacob, and he said, Here am I. And he said, I am God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation. I will go down with thee into Egypt...” [Genesis 46:2,3] but Abraham received no such permission nor promise of God's

presence for his 'sojourn' in Egypt.

We can gain an insight here into Our Lord's temptation too. He suffered a self-induced famine. He had been specifically "led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil." [Matthew 4:2] Have you ever shortened the sentence to see the stark statement? Let me remove the detail so that you can see the thrust... "then was Jesus led... of the Spirit... to be tempted by the devil". He was specifically led by the Spirit into a context where he could be tested by the devil. Perhaps there is another clue here; the word 'devil' literally means 'slanderer'. Ah, that is so often where the temptation to the short-term compromise comes in. A voice whispers in our minds which slanders the character of God; "He has left you to your own devices. You must make your own 'bread'. How about a short trip 'down to Egypt'? "Why not use your own God-given powers to make decisions? Why remain 'hungry' here in the place where God led you?" or as we have in Matthew "If thou be the Son of God, command these stones be made bread" [Matthew 4:3] The Lord's answer is a famous quotation from Deuteronomy "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." He will continue to depend upon God.

It is instructive to see what is happening here and to contrast it with Abraham. Abraham was hungry; Our Lord was hungry. Abraham was hungry because God had led him to a place where he could be tested; Our Lord was hungry for the same reasons. Hunger is a legitimate need; there is no sin in hunger. It is the way God has made us; there is no shame in hunger. But the Spirit led Our Lord to a place in His experience where He must choose between satisfying His legitimate, God-given hunger on the one hand and stepping out of the will of God on the other hand; Jesus chose to remain hungry; Abraham chose to go 'down into Egypt'..

In subtle ways we have become weakened with the idea that being in the will of God means that we can measure our success; converts, blessings, comfort, peace. We instinctively feel that things are wrong when they are difficult. This is the nature of the test for the Spirit-led sons (whether male or female) of God. When I am in difficulty as a direct result of obeying the voice of God and a way 'down into Egypt' opens, how will I respond? You will notice that it is always 'down' into Egypt. But what about my legitimate, God-given, hungers for food, for satisfaction, for a life-partner? What is most important to us? our survival or remaining in the conscious will of God? There is a wonderful story told about C.T. Studd, the pioneer missionary to Africa. He had spent several years in Central Africa trusting God for his supplies and refusing to make his needs known to men. He was joined by a young dentist who observed this pattern of life and saw the ebb and flow of necessary supplies. On one occasion his frustration boiled over and he protested to C.T. Studd. "It is ridiculous to be like this..." he said "...living from hand to mouth, surely we've got to survive!". "Not necessarily..." replied C.T.

Another missionary, Paget Wilkes, once said that a "perfect character would show, gratitude to God, humility to self, and generosity to others", and he would say "all three depend upon a deep personal experience of forgiveness." He meant, of course, that a forgiven man or woman knows they have nothing to be proud about, and that anyone who has known their own heart will not be quick to judge another's. I am reluctant to 'judge' Abraham in this but his journey 'down into Egypt' is too telling to ignore, and these things are recorded in scripture for our benefit; "now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

[1 Corinthians 10:11,12]

Life, of course, is much more predictable 'down in Egypt'. The annual inundation of the Nile made it possible to have a very ordered life. You could set your clock by it, or at least your herbs and lentils. We will see the effect of going 'down to Egypt' later in the lives of Abraham and Lot, but let's look ahead to the time of the Exodus when God spoke of the promised land; "for the land, whither thou goest in to possess it, is not as the land of Egypt, from whence ye came out, where thou sowedst thy seed, and wateredst in with thy foot, as a garden of herbs;" [Deuteronomy 11:10]. That is a fascinating description of Egypt. Life utterly predictable. You sow your seed and water it with your foot. You make ready your irrigation channels blocking the ends with small dams of clay. When you need the water you kick out the little dam with your heel and the Nile's water flows into your garden of herbs. Have you seen a garden of herbs? Everything in its nice neat rows, geometric precision with each little shoot waiting for its dependable supply of water.

"But the land, whither ye go to possess it, is as a land of hills and valleys, and drinketh water of the rain of heaven. A land which the LORD thy God careth for; the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year" [Deuteronomy 11:11,12]

Abraham, did you not realise that "the land" that God has promised is not like the land of Egypt? Egypt's water supply is predictable, dependable, safe and utterly earthly. It is entirely suitable for rows of onions and garlic living their neat predictable lives; growing with their heads in the sand and without a heavenly vision. God has a different plan for your life; you are not be reliant upon earthly floods but on a supply that comes from "the water of the rain of heaven". Did you not realise that the land that God has prepared for you is not flat, even, plains, but the ups and downs of hills and valleys? And it has something much more wonderful than the earth-bound provisions of the Nile flood; God never takes His eyes off it. "the eyes of the LORD thy God are always upon it". [Deuteronomy 11:12]

In our walk of faith, God's path will specifically lead us to times of need and times of abundance; hills and valleys. Beware the temptation to take a quick, reasonable, sojourn in Egypt until the difficult times pass. "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart, and lean not to thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths." [Proverbs 3:5,6] Beware the sensible 'sojourn down in Egypt'. Get your head out of the sand; look up, there is a heavenly supply. And don't fear that He has grown negligent of your needs; the way that God has prepared for you is constantly under His care.

## Chapter 17

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Abraham, My Friend,

Chapter 4: Down into Egypt

What is this that thou hast done?

Beware the temptation to take a quick, reasonable, sojourn in Egypt until the difficult times pass. "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart, and lean not to thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths." [Proverbs 3:5,6] This is how we ended our last devotional meditation. Abraham was on course for Egypt. Have you noticed how the Bible sometimes records events without any moral commentary? Christian's have spirited discussions about the split between Paul and Barnabas; usually deciding in favour of the man whose character best fits their own. The Bible, however, refuses to point a finger or even apportion guilt. We need to be aware of this as we read the scriptures. And sometimes it doesn't need to tell us whether it is right or wrong; we should already know.

It is alarming to see how easy it is to take a second step into compromise once you have taken the first. There is no such thing as a small sin, or a small compromise. Having made his decision Abraham pauses on the border of Egypt with some thoughts for Sarah as to how he can further guarantee his survival. Afraid that his still beautiful wife will be too great a temptation to the people in Egypt he instructs her to be "economic with the truth"; she is not to admit to being his wife and must say that she is Abraham's sister. Abraham reasons that this may save his life; he seems careless of his wife's honour to say the least.

It is instructive to see how fear can cloud our judgment. Peter had been used to eating with the Gentiles: but when an influential group arrived from James, "he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision" [Galatians 2:12] There is a faith which works through love, and perfect love casts out all fear. How often God has caused the words "Fear Not" to be written in scripture. He only speaks to true conditions which shows that this is a continual temptation to the believer. Abraham had decided to 'sojourn in Egypt' through fear of famine conditions in 'the land'; now he puts God's plans at risk in fear for his own life.

Fear is a killer. The Lord spoke to the church at Smyrna and told them to "fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer" [Revelation 2:10] How different this is to the frequent counsel of well meaning Christian friends. "Cheer up" they say "it may never happen" or "everything will be alright". In contrast the Lord says "the devil shall cast some of you into prison ten days;" [Revelation 2:10] How does that fit into your theology? Some would say "the Lord would never allow it". Oh, He might. Your personal survival is not the top of his list of priorities; 'though your well-being is. There are mysteries at work in God's plan which remain hidden from us. It is said of the rider of the red horse that "it was given to him to take peace from the earth," [Revelation 6:3] By whom was it given? When inexplicable pain comes into your life don't believe the slanderer who tells you that God doesn't care.

I am writing this sentence in Romania; many believers here have known what it is like to be 'cast into prison ten days'; their sufferings were great but so was their experience of God. And of this we may be absolutely sure that God has not abdicated His throne, or left us to the devil's wiles. There is a limit beyond which he cannot go, and which God has firmly set. There may well be days of trial but of this we are sure; that if God hath set their number, 10, there ne'er shall be 11. Do not fear the future, don't fear 'fear'; 'fear' is a destructive force. Don't fear 'sorrow'; don't seek it ;that would be masochism but don't fear it either. Sorrow can be a powerfully constructive force in the hands of God.

Abraham has taken his eyes off the goal, and the slide is on. Sarah is taken into Pharaoh's house, no doubt with the ultimate intention of becoming another wife when purification rites and times had been satisfied. We then have another verse which shows just how hard it is to stop the slide once it has begun; Pharaoh "entreated Abraham well for her sake: and he had sheep and oxen, and he asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she-asses, and camels." [Genesis 12:16] It is difficult to calculate just how substantial a 'bride-price' Pharaoh paid to Abraham; asses were worth a fortune in this culture and camels were more valuable still. How could Abraham have acquiesced to this? When I read the account I want to cry out, perhaps as Sarah wanted to cry out, "Abraham, For God's sake, say something!" But compromise always closes the mouth of the witness; "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: having a good conscience... "[1 Peter 3:15,16] It is impossible to witness with conviction when the conscience is defiled.

In His mercy, God called a halt to this disgrace with a sovereign intervention. Not for the last time, the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues. [Genesis 12:17] and, apparently, revealed to Pharaoh the cause of the trouble. Pharaoh's question is a haunting echo from the garden of Eden; "what is this that thou hast done...?" [Genesis 12:18 cf. Genesis 3:13] Eve's folly and Adam's sin had terrible consequences. Sometimes it is a mercy that we 'don't know what we have done' in all its full significance. Eve's folly was an integral step to all our sorrows, and millennia of pain. Sometimes the short-term consequences seem fairly small. After all Abraham gets away with it doesn't he? In fact he does rather well out of the episode. Pharaoh gives him back his wife, and extradites him from Egypt with "all that he had". [Genesis 12:20] So nothing 'lost' and considerable 'gain'; all those sheep, and oxen, and he-asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she-asses, and camels. "And Abraham went up out of Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south. And Abraham was very rich in cattle, in silver and in gold. And he went on his journeys from the south even to Beth-el, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning." [Genesis 13:1-3]

So, all's well that ends well? He is back on course. But Abraham was to discover that it is easier to get his family out of Egypt than it is to get Egypt out of his family. Perhaps partly as a result of this sudden wealth, strife develops between "the herdmen of Abraham's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle" [Genesis 13:7] and Abraham offers Lot the first choice as to where he will be based. The basis of Lot's choice is recorded for us; "Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plains of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar." [Genesis 13:10] Abraham's brief excursion into Egypt has left a lasting impression on the mind of his nephew; he likes what he has seen. Lot will create his own little compromise world here in the

place that reminds him of Egypt; He will pitch his tent facing Sodom. Of course, he wouldn't think of 'settling' in Sodom; not yet anyway. Abraham's compromise has reproduced itself in Lot and the consequences will be very 'long-term'. These are the first steps of Lot's slide. This is Abraham's story so we don't have the time to follow Lot, but if we did we would see his compromise and its consequences. Even when he escapes from Sodom with his life, he is still pleading to be allowed to live in another city; "this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one: Oh let me escape thither, (is it not a little one?)..." {Genesis 19:20} That is the distinctive cry of the compromiser; 'after all, it's only a little one'. Lot's compromise reproduced itself in the morals of his daughters, and resulted in two babies; one called Moab and the other Ammon. Their descendants; the Moabites and the Ammonites would be a thorn in the side of Abraham's family for generations.

And Abraham and Sarah? They didn't do too badly did they? Well it seems as though they did 'ok', except that it does seem very likely that one of those 'maid-servants' that Pharaoh gave to Abraham may have been named 'Hagar'. "Sarah... had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. [Genesis 16:1] and that is a story which runs on to the present day, for Abraham fathered a child by Hagar whom he called Ishmael. [Genesis 28:12] and Ishmael is the father of the Arab nations.

There are promises and warnings in the scriptures, and we do well to take careful note of both. It may well be that we can speed the process of 'wealth gathering' by Egypt's methodology and in the short term it will be viewed by all as a successful enterprise. Many a compromise seems to come and go unnoticed but who can measure the long term consequences of disobedience? There is an interesting story about Mao Tse Tung. Mao was a keen student of history and a foreign journalist once asked him his opinion on the French Revolution. Mao was silent for a moment and then said "it is too soon to say." The church of Christ compromises at its own peril. It may be that today's 'gospel according to Barnum and Bailey' with all its glitz and superstars will bring quick and spectacular results, on the other hand 'it is too soon to say'.

## Chapter 18

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Three: Down into Egypt

Second best?

We have tracked his disastrous descent into Egypt, now let's track his restoration. He went up out of Egypt into the Negeb. And Abraham was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. Or as the Hebrew idiom has it, "very heavy" in cattle, in silver, in gold. Would you be rich? Riches are a heavy burden and not many can carry them without becoming bent under the weight; that was 'not many' not 'not any'.

He returns to the exact spot where he had first called upon the name of Jehovah. (Cf. Genesis 12:8, Genesis 13:3) The intervening verses have been a parenthesis; the story of Abraham's pilgrimage has not moved on. How long was he in Egypt? We are not told but during that time the clock stopped; no progress. He is now 'very rich' but has added nothing to his spiritual wealth. Let him that hath ears... God's chronology is different to that of earth. There is an interesting verse in 1 Kings 6:1 which states that the time between the Exodus and the building of the Temple was 480 years. However if we add the years together we would discover that 594 'earth' years had passed. Of these 594 years, 114 were spent under God's displeasure in the wilderness and under oppressors during the time of the Judges and were lost as regards the ongoing purposes of God in the nation. Take 114 from 594 and we find the 480 that counted. When 'time is no more' I wonder how many years will have 'counted'?

Abraham has gone forward to the past, or 'back to the future' as there can be no 'future' until he returns to the past. His life has come 'full circle'. This is a sobering but glorious truth. It is 'sobering' that we often have to return to 'the beginning'; it is 'glorious' that we can. and he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Hai; unto the place of the altar which he made there at the first: and there Abraham called on the name of the LORD. (Genesis 13:3,4) Beginnings are vital. If 'the beginning' has been right we can return to it again and again. It provides a unique spiritual reference point. If we become spiritually disorientated or 'go down into Egypt' there can be a return to that fixed point and we can begin again from there. In ordinary life I am notorious for my (ab)sense of direction; I once got lost from the middle a funeral cortege travelling at 15 mph. In between the church building and the cemetery I and my passengers lost the plot! I have a friend in Warsaw who won't allow me out in the garden unless the gate is closed! What I lack is that unique starting point from where I can orientate. A genuine spiritual beginning is such a point. If you become lost don't try to be clever with the short-cuts, take the advice of a 'professional' at getting lost; it will be quicker and safer to start again.

Where would you have placed Abraham's beginning? Ur? Haran? Shechem? Or Bethel? There had been visions and words from God before Bethel. There had been at least one altar before Bethel. But Bethel is the place where he 'called upon the name of the LORD'. (Genesis 12:8) This is the place where he had reached out to God in desperation, and called upon the name of the one he knew as Jehovah. 'Jehovah' is not a convenient label as human names are; it is a revelation of character. All God's names are revelations of His character; Jehovah becomes the personal name of the God of Israel. The name signifies the Eternal One; "I am that I am". I am Jehovah, that is my name; and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise unto graven images. Isaiah 42:8 For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. (Malachi 3:6 KJV) The unchanging and unchangeable God, who in the Beginning already 'was' and who was to join Himself in covenant to His people.

This 'god' had revealed Himself to Abraham, and to this 'god' Abraham built an altar. It was to this 'god' that Abraham called, by name. It was this 'god' who Moses would ask to see. And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. (Exodus 33:18) God's answer to Moses is full of instruction. And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and will proclaim the name of Jehovah before thee; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (Exodus 33:19 ASV) Did Moses expect to see spectacular demonstrations of power? God's glory is His character. Moses asks to see 'glory', God says I will make all my goodness pass before thee. Other generations seem to have seen this so much more clearly than our own.

GREAT God of wonders! all thy ways

Display the attributes divine;

But countless acts of pardoning grace

Beyond thine other wonders shine:

Who is a pardoning God like thee?

Or who has grace so rich and free?

And Jehovah descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of Jehovah. And Jehovah passed by before him, and proclaimed, Jehovah, Jehovah, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness and truth, (Exodus 34:5-6 ASV) This is Moses' God, this is Israel's God, this is Abraham's God, this is our God. This and no other. This is the 'god' that the Son revealed and still does; And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it; that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17:26)

God had more to show and He showed it in His Son. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for Jehovah, even Jehovah, is my strength and song; and he is become my salvation. (Isaiah 12:2 ASV). Jehovah... is become my salvation? We have a word for that; Jehoshuah... Joshua... Jesus. The revelation is now complete. The 'god' who declared His nature standing on a stone in the desert declared it in even greater fullness nailed to a cross. Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given

among men, whereby we must be saved. (Acts 4:10-12 KJV)

We cannot know what Abraham knew about God, but God had 'appeared to him' and at Bethel Abraham had 'called upon His name'. Abraham has now returned to the exact spot and calls again upon the name of Jehovah. Those who shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Romans 10:13) and he is 'saved' back into the revealed will of God. Many a visitor to Egypt has returned feeling that things can never be the same again; whatever happens from now can only be 'second best'. Abraham will discover what many have discovered since that with God 'second best' is only 'second' in relation to time and never to quality. For those who will return to the place of their beginnings there awaits a new robe and new sandals and a ring. The ring is the sign of delegated authority; authority to act for the giver. He is the Lord of the rings.

So to all who have taken a 'sojourn in Egypt' here is your invitation. Turn around and head back to your beginnings. Recall to mind the character of your God, give yourself to Him again as you did before, and call on His Name. The promise is not just of 'restoration' but more blessing than ever before; And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you. And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you: and my people shall never be ashamed. And ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God, and none else: and my people shall never be ashamed. And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit. (Joel 2:25-29 KJV)

## Chapter 19

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Three: Down into Egypt

When Lot left, Jehovah said...

I hope we are not going too slowly for you. It has taken us 3 months to cover 2 chapters, however, I see this is assisting our goal rather than hindering it. One of the greatest dangers of the age in which we live is its 'instant news-bite' mood. "Cut to the chase" they say, "what is your bottom line?" "Get on with it, stop beating around the bush". Did you know that Finney advocated that preachers 'beat around the bush'. "Beat around every bush" he said "leave the sinner nowhere to hide". The church has become infested with programme management; visions, mission statements, early-wins, mile-stones, deliverables. "if you can't measure it you're not controlling it, if you're not controlling it you're not managing it" has become the great slogan. So our preaching and teaching has become progressively 'project-orientated'. Let me nail my colours to the mast; God is person-orientated, not project-orientated. It is not good resource management to leave 99 in the wilderness, but it is the way God works. It is not good recruitment and retention policy to hand-train James for three years for a key role, and then allow him to be martyred. This inefficiency has a simple cause; God is not a chief-executive, He is a Father. He is not primarily concerned with goals but with the journey. He is not producing a million on an assembly-line; He is hand-crafting a unique character to glorify His Son.

This is the great advantage of meditating on the life story of a man like Abraham. Theologically, the instinct is to make him fit into the stages of our evangelical project, but God is not managing a project, He is 'fathering' this man's soul and He will take as long as He needs. Reading the story slowly gives it its proper rhythm. Let me make my point in a provocative way. For conservative evangelicals the great starting point is 'saving faith'; the moment of 'decision', the altar call, the sinner's prayer. In the biography of Abraham we are still a chapter and a half away from this event. In terms of our evangelical mile-stones the 'project' hasn't even started. He was 75 years old when he left Haran; we do not know how long he tarried in Haran, nor how long the journey from Ur to Haran might have taken, nor how long the sojourn in Egypt... I would estimate the first two chapters of his life cover about 10 years, and we have a couple of years more still to go before he is 'justified by faith' in Genesis 15:6. How is all this fitting into your theology? I once read that Andrew Murray refused to write his testimony; "it would be too confusing" was his reason. If we read the scriptures aright we shall find principles rather than methods, and examples rather than blueprints.

What principle can we discover in this next 'step' of Abraham's faith? According to the narrative of Genesis, the revelation is developing progressively in the life of Abraham. His initial direction had been to leave Ur and journey "unto a land that I will shew thee" (Genesis 12:1). The initial promise

was of guidance rather than inheritance. When he arrived in Shechem God fulfilled his promise; 'a land' became 'this land'. He had arrived. The promise was enlarged to include not only guidance but the promise of inheritance; not to Abraham but to his 'seed'. (Genesis 12:7) Have you noticed that the land has not been promised to Abraham yet? Each step of his obedience brings more revelation with the prospect of a new cycle; revelation, obedience, revelation.

Abraham's initial instruction had been to "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house..." (Genesis 12:1) When he buried his father in Haran and moved on the revelation unfolded more, but there was one part of this command that Abraham had not yet implemented. The command was to separate from 'father's house' and 'kindred'. His nephew Lot had followed Abraham from Ur to Haran, from Haran to Shechem, from Shechem to Bethel, from Bethel to Egypt, from Egypt to Bethel. His following of Abraham had brought Lot great riches but had added nothing spiritually. The conflict between their herdsmen came to a head and Abraham allows Lot to choose his future and Abraham will have what is left. Lot makes his choice "and they separated themselves the one from the other." (Genesis 13:12) The interesting thing is that this event becomes a date-stamp in Abraham pilgrimage; The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you." (Genesis 13:14-17 NASB) After Lot has left God says 'now'. It is a key truth to observe in our Christian walk; the way that one event unlocks the next.

I wonder how long God had waited to reveal these things to Abraham? What wonders God has in store for those who will trust Him wholly. In the northern hills of England you will find 'cairns', small heaps of stones that travellers would add to as they passed by. Originally when you stood by a 'cairn' you would be able to see two other 'cairns' at least. In the featureless moorlands you could journey safely by walking from one 'cairn' to the next. God's guidance often comes like this. We are anxious to know the final destination, and we would prefer to see the whole journey mapped out with its mile-stones but often all we can see is the next 'cairn'. Just walk on in faith; the second step will be revealed when you have obeyed the first. Sometimes we spend far too much energy in seeking guidance; just keep your eye on that 'cairn' and take the next step. As a teenager I used to walk across some of those northern moors. The ore deposits could set your compass spinning and the years of decayed moss and rain had cut the peat into a 10 foot deep maze. The only safe way across was to pocket the compass, ignore all 'senses' of direction and head for the next 'cairn'. Perhaps what you are needing is not 'more guidance' but simpler obedience. Just do the last thing He told you to do. It may be the trigger that opens the next seal of your personal destiny.

"Now" at the point of this fuller obedience, for the first time, God promises the land to Abraham and commands him to "walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee." (Genesis 13:17) He has been instructed first to 'look' now he must 'walk'. This is always the test; can we 'earth' the vision. Can the pattern that we have seen in the mount be built on earth? Can the eye-witnesses of His majesty in the mountain carry his saving power to the demoniac in the valley? It's not just walking the talk, but walking the vision. How often we have returned to this theme of walking in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham. We are touching a

fundamental Bible image here, walking. It's not spectacular, walking... but it is the ultimate test. Listen to the building climax of this familiar passage; "He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." (Isaiah 40:29-31 KJV) Did you know that it takes more grace to walk than to soar? Some years ago I was reading the application form of a young African. His English spelling was idiosyncratic, and his testimony was fascinating; it had constant references to the 'Holy Spurt'. It was amusing and we all knew that he was referring to the Spirit, but it was provoking too; how many have a testimony that is full of 'Holy Spurts'! We hear a challenging sermon or testimony and experience the spiritual equivalent of the adrenalin spurt, but after the spurt comes that dip of deep spiritual weariness. It takes more grace to walk than to run.

God had another word for his people some centuries later. "Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses." (Joshua 1:3 KJV) The 'sole' of your foot; that means you are walking. Not running, leaping, or even flying... just walking. And again we are touching that profound mystery of the omnipotence of God and the necessary obedience of man. We find it in Paul's closing words to the saints in Rome; "And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen." (Romans 16:20 KJV) Certainly we need the grace of God, but the wonder is that God needs our feet!

We leave this chapter with Abraham in classic posture; he has his vision and his commission and now he pauses to build another altar. He stands and his eyes follow the rising smoke of his sacrifice. He is giving himself to God, again. How often have we seen him standing like this? Here is a vital lesson for those who would learn to be My Friends... "They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." I love this verse. Not the preachers nor the prophets, not the leaders nor the theologians, not the experts...but those that wait upon the LORD.

## Chapter 20

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Four: New Beginnings

Kings, Confederates and a Priest

I would like to ask you to read this instalment twice. Genesis 14 is packed with action and relevance. It gives a vivid background to the kind of world that Abraham lived in and shows that God deals with men, not in the clinical isolation of a laboratory but, in the 'real world'. There is too much in the chapter to expound verse by verse in this kind of forum; if we go too slowly we shall miss the great sweep of things and if we go too quickly we shall miss some vital ingredients in the unfolding story. So... I'm going to ask you to read this instalment, then read Genesis 14 carefully and then read this instalment again.

It begins with the ebb and flow of conflict; it is the first time the Bible uses the word 'war'. The combatants are city-states with rulers called 'kings'; it is the first time the Bible uses that word too. The trouble began in Abraham's old home-town area of Mesopotamia; it was almost as if the past came looking for him. Four Mesopotamian city-states had entered into some kind of military alliance. Each king could call upon the others for military assistance and in this instance it was King Chedorlaomer who called in the favours. For 12 years Chedorlaomer had controlled a group of five city-states centred around the southern end of the Dead Sea, which was evidently much more fertile then than now. The five city-states included the city of Sodom, outside of which Lot had originally pitched his tent with its door towards the city. By the time of Genesis 14 Lot has become thoroughly integrated; he dwelt in Sodom. (Genesis 14:11)

Meanwhile Abraham has settled in the Hebron area on the land of Mamre. (Genesis 13:18) Mamre was one of three Amorite brothers; the full family role call being Mamre, Eschol and Aner. (Genesis 14:13) Abraham settled here among the 'oaks of Mamre'; Then a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew. Now he was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner, and these were allies with Abram. (Genesis 14:13 NASB) Abraham too apparently has joined some kind of alliance. The KJV refers to it as a Confederacy. The word signifies that Abraham had entered into a covenant with the three Amorite brothers. In fact, the word used says clearly that Abraham was very much the junior partner in this covenant; the Amorite brothers were 'masters (or owners) of the covenant' with Abraham. In the midst of all the volatility of warring city-states these protective covenants would have been very frequent. The NASB calls them 'allies', but the text shows they were very unequal allies. The terms of the covenant were probably very simple, if one member of the alliance were attacked the other allies were duty bound to assist. This alliance will have provided a protective shield for Abraham; its purpose was not to assist aggressive conquest but be seen as a defensive shield around Abraham's clan. In the first Gulf War an alliance of states assembled terrifying military might around Kuwait as an initial defence for

Saudi Arabia; they called this stage of operations 'Desert Shield'. This covenant/confederacy/alliance with the three Amorite brothers was Abraham's own Desert Shield.

Was Abraham right to have entered into this political alliance? There is always a subtle temptation 'to confederate' when threats appear on the horizon. 'There's safety in numbers' says the proverb; sometimes perhaps, sometimes not. Let me provoke you a little. Why, in Genesis 11, did they build the tower of Babel, that symbol of human defiance and solidarity? The record tells us that that they had several aims; to make a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven is the well known aim. But they had a secondary motive too; let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth. 'Names' have the power to hold things together and being together makes human beings feel safer; we are back to 'safety in numbers' again. The 'name' becomes the rallying point. There is a verb which means 'to give a name to something'; it is the word 'denominate' and 'a denomination' is a something to which we have given a name. Why would we do that? It is all part of the protective instinct; we are (my apologies to all my American friends) getting the wagons into a circle. This defines 'us' and keeps 'them' outside. And by doing so we fail to make the most obvious observation which is that "every time I shut someone out, I lock myself in." In creating my own denominational 'Desert Shield' I need to beware lest my protection insulate me from God too. The alliance may become the insurance policy. "in God we trust"? or in our alliances? (Again, I ask forgiveness from my American friends; I am just illustrating)

For 12 years those 5 city-states paid tribute to Chedorlaomer, and in the 13th year decided to break free. In the 14 year Chedorlaomer came, with his allies, wreaking retribution down the eastern side of the Jordan. The 5 city-states joined together for a pre-emptive strike. The opposing forces met in the Valley of Siddim in an area that was full of tar-pits. (Genesis 14:10) The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled and fell and the remnant of their armies attempted to escape into the mountains. Sodom and Gomorrah were then plundered by the Mesopotamian alliance, and among the deportees was Lot, Abraham's nephew. Abraham "unsheathed" (a literal translation) 318 of his trained men and 'Desert Shield' became 'Desert Storm'. In a daring night attack they divided their force and hit Chedorlaomer's caravan of armies and plunder at Dan. If you 'read between the lines' in this record you will see that Abraham's 318 was not the entire force that he commanded. We discover that other men went with me (Genesis 14:24) and he names them, Aner, Eschol and Mamre... his allies. I think it likely that we are not just talking about 3 individuals here but three military leaders and their forces.

The mission is a complete success: Chedorlaomer and his alliance are completely destroyed and all the hostages and plunder are rescued. (Genesis 14:16,17) Whatever the original relationship with Aner, Eschol and Mamre, Abraham is now the recognised military leader; his word will divide the spoils.

But on the triumphal journey home Abraham has encounters and makes choices that will alter his life dramatically and permanently. His first encounter was with the new king of Sodom who had a proposition to put to Abraham. Imagine these encounters. Abraham, if not bruised and bloodied, certainly exhausted by the journeys and the conflict. He is at the height of his reputation, the hero of the hour. This is the moment to strike the deal, and there is a fabulous deal on the table. He will never be in a stronger position to enhance his wealth and standing. Let's run ahead of our story

and look at what is on offer in the 'Sodom Deal'.

The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give the people to me and take the goods for yourself." (Genesis 14:21 NASB) What is on offer here for Abraham? The four kings had plundered cities down the eastern side of the Jordan and the cities of the plain. Archaeology has shown us the fabulous wealth of these city-states at this time in history. Their treasures were of gold and precious stones and each city treasury would have been worth a king's ransom. But the plunder was not the wealth of one city but of many such cities; the list is very comprehensive... In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him, came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim and the Zuzim in Ham and the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, and the Horites in their Mount Seir, as far as El-paran, which is by the wilderness. Then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and conquered all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites, who lived in Hazazon-tamar. (Genesis 14:5-7) and they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their victuals, and went their way... (Genesis 14:11) This represents almost unbelievable wealth. It would probably have made Abraham the richest man of his day. His fabulous wealth would have bought him any alliance he needed. His future was assured; his safety and his wealth were guaranteed. Just think of the influence such a man could have carried in his sphere of life; the whole region would have come under his sway. What a 'power for good' the Sodom Deal would have made possible. But there's no point in imagining any of it because Abraham turned it down.

Before the 'Sodom Deal' was brokered, Abraham had met Melchizedek, king of Salem. The King of Sodom may speak for Sodom, but Melchizedek is a priest; he had spoken for God. This is one of the formative encounters of the Bible so we will leave the details until the next instalment, but let's hear 'the bottom line'. Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, for fear you would say, 'I have made Abram rich.' "I will take nothing except what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their share." (Genesis 14:22-24 NASB)

In one action Abraham had sworn fealty to Jehovah, God most high. In that action he had forfeited all his other allegiances and left himself defenceless. He had turned his back on the rewards of his victory and renounced fabulous wealth. It was immediately following this choice, having thrown away his human shield and poured his treasure into the sand that the word of the LORD came to Abraham in a vision, saying "Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward" (Genesis 15:1)

As Jim Elliot once said 'he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep and gains what he cannot lose'.

## Chapter 21

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Four: New Beginnings

Melchizedek; time to sit and eat

In our previous devotional we gave an overview of Abraham's encounter with kings, confederates and a priest. We can take time now to think a little more about his remarkable meeting with that priest, Melchizedek. Who was this man and why did his meeting with Abraham have such a profound effect.?

Melchizedek is an enigma. We just don't have enough evidence to answer the question, although that often has not hindered the attempt. He bursts upon the scene without warning or explanation. He is not the only Old Testament character to do so; Elijah is another. But we know something of Elijah's origins, his 'terminus a quo'; he is Elijah the Tishbite. We know his origins; he came from Tishbeh in Gilead. We also know his end, his 'terminus ad quem'; he is carried up into heaven by a whirlwind. Elijah's life is bordered by known points; not so Melchizedek's. He is, to use the language of the letter to the Hebrews, without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life. (Hebrews 7:3) Does this mean that Melchizedek was eternal and consequently an uncreated being? I think not. It is the 'type' of Melchizedek which is being expounded in Hebrews. We need to distinguish between the 'type' of the thing and the thing itself. For example, there is a remarkable 'type' of the truth that 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son' in the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. Abraham, the Father, takes His only son whom thou lovest to the place of sacrifice. The wood for the sacrifice is laid on the shoulders of the sacrifice as the two go both of them together in perfect agreement to the place of death which became the place of hope and promise. It is a heart-stopping picture of Calvary. (I remember sitting 'stunned' the first time I saw it.) But Abraham was not the Father, and Isaac was not the Son, and Moriah was not Calvary; they were 'types' of those things. If you make an absolute equation of "Abraham = God" we shall end with by trying to 'join all the dots' for the rest of Abraham's life; this will include subterfuge, lying, disobedience etc. It is the Biblical account of Melchizedek which is the 'type', and that account is an enigma. Abraham had a meeting with an enigma; in our pilgrimage we must all have our meeting with an enigma; Someone that in our beginnings, we may only see 'dimly'.

What is an enigma? It is a person or event without an explanation; it is a puzzle, a question without an answer. The word is used in its original sense in our Bible; For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (1 Corinthians 13:12 KJV) the word 'darkly, is literally 'in an enigma'. The Good News Bible captures the sense in its paraphrase What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete---as complete as God's

knowledge of me. (1 Corinthians 13:12 GNB). Melchizedek was not the reality; he was a 'dim image'. Ancient mirrors were notorious, not at all like our modern variety. The blemishes in the metal meant you could never see with absolute clarity; the overall impression, the shape, any notable features; these you would see, but a crystal clear image, this was not available. It is important to remember this in our use of the Old Testament; its notable features are vitally important and to be observed carefully but it is only in Christ that we see clearly the One who being the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had made purification of sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; (Hebrews 1:3 ASV)

So whose image is it that we 'see dimly' in the mirror of the historical Melchizedek? Hebrews 7:3 tells us that Melchizedek was "made like the Son of God". It could be translated "modelled on". The model for the Biblical revelation of Melchizedek was Christ Himself. According to our information given in Genesis 14, Melchizedek is an eternal moment. It neither began nor ended. As such the brief glimpse will supply an important feature that will later be seen in clarity in Christ Himself. The writer to the Hebrews will expand this to illustrate that Christ's role is now unchanging, never fading; he remains a priest continually (Hebrews 7:3)

This is the next feature of our 'dim image' that God is drawing attention to; Melchizedek was a priest. In fact, he is the first priest mentioned in our Bible. He was, literally, 'a priest unto God, Most High' (Gen 18) Often in Bible teaching we have to begin with demolition before we can begin the construction; Peter began in a similar way on the day of Pentecost. Due to the almost universal misunderstanding of what a priest is and does, we have to begin by saying what a priest 'is not'. It is not a licensed practitioner of a religion or denomination. The Hebrew word is 'Kohen', and beyond that there is little to tell. It is a verb-participle which does tell us that the emphasis is not on the role but the function. This comes as a surprise to many, but the KJV has led us along a thought process with almost 30 references to 'the office of...'; none of which are justified. We now, almost inevitably think of 'offices' and 'roles'. We might get the sense better if we invent a verb 'to priest'. This is not a role or office but a way of life. Melchizedek priested God, Most High. Melchizedek served God in a unique relationship/function. We would need to read much more of the Bible to see the way in which that relationship/function operated. Earlier in our 'weekly devotionals' we thought about the way in which Levitical priests were authorised to 'bless the people'. One of the facets of 'priesting' is that of 'blessing'; it presupposes that the blesser has something that the blessee does not have; but from where does he get that 'something'? Melchizedek 'priested' God; it was this relationship which made it possible for him, as a priest, to bless another.

He had brought forth bread and wine. (Genesis 14:18) These are more than simple symbols of sustenance. In all Semitic cultures hospitality is a high virtue and to take on the task of hospitality was a very great responsibility. There are at least two terrible stories of the importance of hospitality in the Old Testament; to non-Semitic cultures they seem barbaric. (Genesis 19:8, Judges 19:24) On each occasion the overriding responsibilities of hospitality caused a householder to offer the surrender of his daughter/s for sexual abuse, rather than default on his duties as host. The guest became the supreme responsibility of his host, and the guest's safety was non-negotiable, even at the cost of the lives of his family. David's decree that Mephibosheth should eat bread at my table continually (2 Sam 9) is not just a promise of free meals; it shows he would have a permanent place in David's home and heart, and had come under David's personal

protection. Our Communion Meal of Bread and Wine is not just a convenient picture of sustenance; it is the Lord's Table and the Lord's Cup (1 Cor 10:21), and He is the host. We are under His personal protection. Originally, your safety was the responsibility of your host as long as his 'bread was in your stomach'. Melchizedek's offer was not of a picnic but of fellowship and consequent safety. It is true of Melchizedek's 'model' too; as long as we have his 'bread in our stomach' we are His responsibility. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. (John 6:51 KJV)

Abraham now has 'relationship' with someone who has the relationship of 'priest' with God, Most High. Can you see the consistent pattern? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. (John 14:6 KJV) or even more precisely in Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25 KJV) Salvation is the consequence of being rightly related to God through a priest; salvation/safety is the consequence of a relationship not an experience. This is why the 'once saved, always saved?' question is really the wrong question. Melchizedek's offer to Abraham is not the offer of an experience but of a relationship, typified in the communion/fellowship meal of bread and wine. Into what were we called? God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:9 NASB) Here is the test, not have I had this experience or that but 'am I in fellowship with His Son'? Everything else will flow from this, including my continuing safety.

We have seen before that when a properly authorised 'priest' blesses someone in the Name of God that blessing will 'stick'. In other words this not just the speaking out of correct words but the imparting of something given by God Himself through His designated channel. Melchizedek 'blessed' Abraham and you may be sure that Abraham was blessed! Last week we noted the Sodom Deal; it is typical of all religious deals in that the offerer offers something on condition that he receives something; The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give the people to me and take the goods for yourself." (Genesis 14:21 NASB) All the world's religions fit into this pattern; give something to me, and get something for yourself. But Melchizedek asks for nothing. He offers fellowship and blessing, but he asks for nothing. This is grace; God's undeserved gift. Actually there is 'something' required of man. It is highlighted in one of the Psalms; What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD. (Psalms 116:12-13 KJV) What shall I give? I will give my 'amen'. I will agree with God, I will take what He has offered. Grace must be received. George Herbert saw it long ago.

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,

Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

If I lacked anything.

"A guest", I answered, "worthy to be here:"

Love said, "You shall be he".

"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,

I cannot look on thee."

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

"Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame

Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"

"My dear, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."

So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert 1633

## Chapter 22

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Four: New Beginnings

Melchizedek; revealer of God

Last week we began to think about Abraham's encounter with the priest Melchizedek and we began to ask our questions. Who was this man and why did his meeting with Abraham have such a profound effect on Abraham? We made 'communion' or 'fellowship' our focus; this week we will consider another aspect of priesthood.

There's that word again, priest! Every time I use it I almost feel compelled to say but 'not what most people understand as priests'. It has been one of Satan's most successful strategies to obscure Bible truths by producing counterfeits of them. A heresy is just an idea pushed past the limits of Biblical revelation and without regard to complementary truths. Faith which is not based on true revelation is superstition; it matters little whether pagan, catholic or evangelical. For most people ideas of church are bordered by the ideas of priests, pulpit, pews and fixed services. It can be very disturbing to be told that true biblical Christianity needs none of these and that often they are more hindrance than help. However, men do make counterfeits of things which are authentic and every fake pound or dollar note is based on a genuine one. When Christ said He was the True Bread and True Vine, He was contrasting the True with the Fake. Where there is a counterfeit, it implies that a genuine may be found, if we search.

Fake priesthood always develops into priestcraft; the control of the people. The priest holds information or powers which enable him to control those who are without that information or those powers. The fake priest then dispenses these things to the people on condition of their submission and obedience. He has become a mercenary; in return for honour or cash or obedience he will dispense his wares. The man who was intended as a gift from God becomes parasitic; his gifts are only available... on condition. In Melchizedek we see how differently a true priest functions; his gifts are genuine gifts which cannot be purchased. The true priest makes possible things which would be impossible without him: fellowship with God, blessing from God, and revelation from God and again, in the opposite direction he becomes the route through which man gives to God. We have already given some thought to the priest as the conveyor of blessing, and the mediator of fellowship now it is time to consider the priest as a channel of a revelation of God.

Melchizedek is the possessor of a revelation of the nature and character God; he knows God in a way that Abraham does not. Let's pause to be sure we are appreciating Abraham's developing walk with God; he is learning. He began as part of a family that 'served other gods'; Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served

other gods. (Joshua 24:2 NASB) There is a link in this verse between god and geography. It was the way in which ancient people often thought and lived. There is a classic example in the wonderful story of Naaman; When he returned to the man of God with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from your servant now." But he said, "As the LORD lives, before whom I stand, I will take nothing." And he urged him to take it, but he refused. Naaman said, "If not, please let your servant at least be given two mules' load of earth; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice to other gods, but to the LORD. (2 Kings 5:15-17 NASB) Naaman wants to continue to serve Jehovah but links Him inseparably with the land of Israel. However, Naaman has a neat solution; he will take a little bit of Israel's land with him. As Jehovah is linked with the land this will mean that Jehovah will still be able to have some jurisdiction in Syria even though it isn't His land. The Assyrian empires expatriates expressed a similar feeling; So they spoke to the king of Assyria, saying, "The nations whom you have carried away into exile in the cities of Samaria do not know the custom of the god of the land; so he has sent lions among them, and behold, they kill them because they do not know the custom of the god of the land." (2 Kings 17:26 NASB) Of course we are much wiser now; we wouldn't think of making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, or to Toronto or Pensacola to be closer to God... would we?

Bible scholars like to call Abraham's faith 'incipient monotheism'. By this they mean that Abraham was a practical monotheist but that he probably still believed that other gods had jurisdiction over other geographical areas. We won't defend 'incipient monotheism' here but I do want to make the important point that Abraham had not read Calvin's Institutes or graduated from a prestigious Bible college; intellectually he knew much less than you and me about God. He was 'walking' and learning with every step. He will learn something from Melchizedek in this encounter; something that came to Abraham as a revelation. Melchizedek, priest of the Most High God, speaks to Abraham in the name of the 'Most High God' who is 'possessor of heaven and earth'. "What is so special about that" you say "the children in the Sunday School know that". They do, but Abraham didn't and it was through the ministry of a genuine a priest that it was revealed to him. But then this is part of true priesthood, to bring revelation from God, freely and without price.

Later in the Bible story we will see the development of Israel's priesthood and we will see the same themes of things made possible through priesthood which would be impossible without it: fellowship with God, blessing from God, and revelation from God etc. In the prophecy of Malachi God brings his final Old Testament accusations against Israel and it is the failed priesthood that he holds responsible; "For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. "But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 2:7-8 NASB) It is an accusation that God brought against His people on more than one occasion; Cause Me to remember; let us enter into judgment together; sum up for yourself, that you may be justified. Your first father sinned, and your interpreters transgressed against Me. And I will defile the rulers of the sanctuary, and will give Jacob to the curse, and Israel to reviling. (Isaiah 43:26-28 LITV) The KJV has 'teachers' here but the Hebrew word 'lu■ts' is frequently translated 'interpreter'. What a privilege and responsibility it is to be an 'interpreter' for God. I have some personal experiences here. I have preached through 'interpreters' in more than 20 countries and it is interesting to see how different

the experience can be. For what it is worth, here is my advice. I prefer interpreters to translators; I want my message to pass through the soul of the man (or woman) at my side. I have experienced translators of technical brilliance and I expect every word was translated perfectly. I have also experienced 'interpreters' whose language skills were not nearly so polished but through whom the message flowed. Here is some more advice for those who will use interpreters; let 'him' get to know you. Spend time together; let him see how you live. He will need to be able to trust you; be in fellowship with him. (If you would be God's interpreter my advice is the same.) Let me illustrate; if I am in a new setting where the people hardly know me I will sometimes begin by saying "don't believe a word I tell you..." Most translators can't cope with this; they don't know me, they don't trust me implicitly. I returned from Poland two days ago, my interpreter has done the job for almost 20 years; he knows me and will trust me. He will convey just what I said so that I can add "...unless this Book says the same". His interpretation flows from his relationship with me and our mutual trust.

True interpretation is not a mechanism, it is a relationship. Did you ever notice this little gem; And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach, (Mark 3:14 KJV) We can only really interpret to others what we have learned by being with Him. The priest-nation of Israel was expected to interpret the will of God to the nations; they loved the privilege but failed in the responsibility; Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, And knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law. (Romans 2:17-20 KJV) But Melchizedek was a faithful interpreter of his revelation. Abraham immediately built the revelation into the foundations of his understanding of God as we see from his later reply to the new king of Sodom; And Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lift up mine hand unto the LORD, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth, (Genesis 14:22 KJV)

There is an important truth to understand here in the whole area of revelation. Abraham received this truth and immediately risked his life upon it. Biblical truth is usually moral revelation; it must always have a consequence in the way in which we live our lives. Paul writes We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak; (2 Corinthians 4:13 KJV) Faith is our necessary response to revelation, but faith will never stand alone in this; there will always be a 'therefore'. A change in behaviour must always follow genuine faith; it is a logical next step 'therefore'. I am an Englishman and I believe that the Rolls Royce is the finest car in the world, but this 'belief' has never affected my life or behaviour in the slightest degree. This kind of 'belief' is not biblical 'faith'; it is mental assent. Sadly, there are many who give mental assent to Bible propositions and their lives have no 'therefore'. Revelation must precede response, but life-change must accompany genuine faith. Abraham received the revelation by means of the priest Melchizedek and it altered his whole way of thinking. He abandoned his defence covenant with the Amorite brothers and forfeited his right to the plunder simply because of this revelation. Faith based on revelation will result in new relationships and dependencies.

There is another priest of which Melchizedek is only a dim-reflection. Part of His work is to reveal God; No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father,

He has explained Him. (John 1:18 NASB) This word is used in Greek literature of one who unfolds or interprets truth. To receive His testimony is to receive Him. The scriptures make this point frequently too. To 'receive Christ' biblically is to receive His testimony/words; His unique revelation of God. Trace the word 'receive' through John and test the truth of this. To refuse the revelation is to put ourselves in the condemned cell; He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (John 3:18-19 KJV) To refuse the revelation is to choose condemnation. Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them. The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple. (Psalms 119:129-130 KJV) It is the entrance of His words that give light; refusing them brings inevitable condemnation.

Abraham is learning these truths in his own way and his own day. Each right response to revelation from God brings him closer to the next revelation. And so he grows step by step, day by day, into Abraham, My Friend... and so may we.

## Chapter 23

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Four: New Beginnings

The Lord hath need...

We are meditating on Abraham's meeting with Melchizedek and have tried to identify some key elements of this encounter. We have seen authentic "communion" with God, a genuine priest's power to bless in the name of the Lord, the way in which a genuine priest becomes a vehicle for new revelation. It would be good to remind ourselves that all these elements are initiatives of Melchizedek himself; it was Melchizedek who brought out tokens of fellowship to Abraham; Melchizedek took every first step. There is much to learn here. God is the first mover. He must always be the origin, and originator; our responsibility in these matters is simply to respond to God's ability and direction. It is time now to examine Abraham's response.

Tithing can become a matter of controversy in modern Christian circles and when it does reference is usually made to this passage of Scripture. This passage of Scripture however lends no support to mandatory tithing; this was Abraham's spontaneous reaction not a command. It is a curious reaction when you examine the circumstances. Abraham had just received a revelation that God was "possessor of heaven and earth" and if this were true why would Abraham need to give anything to God through the priest? There is a truth here which may help us to understand the link between man's responsibility and God's sovereignty.

It is a theological axiom that God is the only self-sufficient being; all other beings have some kind of dependence but God is totally independent. Charles Wesley wrote;

Fountain of good, all blessing flows

From Thee; no want Thy fullness knows;

What but Thyself canst Thou desire?

Yet, self-sufficient as Thou art,

Thou dost desire my worthless heart;

This, only this, dost Thou require.

This really is a theological axiom; it is a divine attribute. Abraham has just seen a glimpse of this truth in the revelation that God is "possessor of heaven and earth" and yet his instinct is to give something to God. How can we understand this?

Perhaps we will begin to understand if we look elsewhere in the Scripture. Some of us who have spent time in the Anglican Communion will recognise these words; "all things come from thee, and of thine own have we given thee". The words are usually spoken at the time of the collection. They come from the story of David and the building of the temple. We will not rehearse the whole story here but this passage records David's joy at the privilege of being allowed to contribute to a house for God. As a result of his warfare and conquest David has amassed a vast fortune to facilitate the building of a house fit for God. If we had the time we could trace his history and try to measure the energy that he had put into this treasure; it was considerable. Nevertheless David shows his amazing ability to focus on the real issue; he declares that everything he has had been given to him by God. We might say that God had no need for David's contribution. After all God is self-sufficient, by definition. He needs nothing. And yet God had taken David through multitudes of trials and tribulations to enable him to fund the temple. It would probably be too much to hope to solve the Arminian and Calvinist controversy in one short sentence but we may make a small contribution. It would seem that God has decided to do certain things in certain way; this is His sovereign choice. Surely this is what sovereignty means. When Christ became man He consciously emptied himself. [Philippians 2: 7] In so doing he limited himself and this voluntary limitation has confused Unitarians ever since. Having chosen to be "the son of man" it was essential that He behave as man. In the wilderness He was strongly tempted to behave as "the son of God" but His reply showed clearly the terms on which He had chosen to live His life on earth; But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. (Matthew 4:4 KJV). He lived his life on earth as 'man' with all man's limitations. He chose dependence upon his Father and the Father would now only do His will through the dependence of the Son. [John 5:19]

Let's see if we can see this working in another narrative. It is the story of a fulfilled prophecy. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass. (Zechariah 9:9 KJV) God gave this revelation to Zachariah 500 years earlier and having given it had limited Himself to a particular way of working. As a result of this prophecy Zion's King would have to arrive riding upon the colt of an ass; any other means of arrival had been automatically disqualified. As a result of God's free determination he now needed a colt. The gospel writers take up the fulfilment of this prophecy; And saith unto them, Go your way into the village over against you: and as soon as ye be entered into it, ye shall find a colt tied, whereon never man sat; loose him, and bring him. And if any man say unto you, Why do ye this? say ye that the Lord hath need of him; and straightway he will send him hither. (Mark 11:2-3 KJV) What amazing combination of words this is; the Lord hath need... Were ever such words juxtaposed? There are some astonishing statements in Scripture; the Lord hath need is surely among them. As a result of a self-imposed limitation, the Lord hath need.

Let's return to the story of David and his prayer. His statement is theologically accurate; Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name. But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee. For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding. O LORD our God, all this store that we have prepared to build thee an house for thine holy name cometh of thine hand,

and is all thine own. (1 Chronicles 29:13-16 KJV) David was blessed with some amazing insights. His prayer continues... I know also, my God, that thou triest the heart, and hast pleasure in uprightness. As for me, in the uprightness of mine heart I have willingly offered all these things: and now have I seen with joy thy people, which are present here, to offer willingly unto thee. (1 Chronicles 29:17 KJV) He has discovered something. He has discovered that 'God gives us things to see what we will do with them'; He trieth the heart. Job uses the verb tried in a particularly relevant context, the purification of metal. But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold. (Job 23:10 KJV) God is often doing more than one thing at a time; He is not preoccupied with mile-stones. He is also the supreme multi-tasker; And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28 NASB) Did you notice that phrase "all things"? It really does mean "all things". And did you notice that phrase "work together"? This is the word so much loved of corporate business and project management, synergy. Everything that God works is perfectly synchronised with everything else that God works; all things are divinely 'synergised' for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. I often claim that 'I can cook anything; any one thing'. It is not difficult to do one thing, but it takes God to do everything, at the same time, perfectly.

The Jesuits taught that 'the end justifies the means' but this has never been a biblical pattern for life. God is not just achieving milestones; He is working in the lives of His workers. Is anything too hard for the Lord? If He had wished He could have spoken the temple into existence, but that would not have provided the opportunity to try David's heart. The means are every bit as important as the ends in the work of God. There's only one reason why God can't do things without human agency, and that is that He has decided He will not do so! For praying men and women that concept has awesome implications. If there are things that God has decided He will not do without human agency, the implication is that some things will not happen that might have happened... if we do not pray. This does not mean that our prayer has intrinsic power but that God has decided His will should be accomplished by this route, and by no other.

Abraham knows that God needs nothing; God is possessor of heaven and earth. Nevertheless, God does "need" this gift from Abraham. It is a vital part of the heart preparation of the man who will become the Friend of God. Hudson Taylor used to say "God's work done in God's way at God's time will never lack God's resources"; this is a true testimony. God's work does not need human resources in the way a business would need resources. God's work needs human resources because God has decided that God's work will need human resources. Spiritual bookkeeping is very different to the ordinary kind; "two mites" is more than the combined offerings of Israel. Not relatively more, just more. The widow put in more than all the others; she put in two mites. Abraham is learning that although God does not need our contribution He does need our cooperation... because He has chosen to need it.

There is an amazing phrase used in Paul's 1 Corinthians; But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; (1 Corinthians 12:20-22 NASB) It is amazing because Paul constantly refers to Christ as 'the head of the body', but in this verse insists that the head cannot declare its independence of the foot. Can it be true that one single member is vital to the working

of the one body? Is it true that the foot is necessary for God to work His perfect will? Not optional, but necessary? Yes, because God has ordained it so. In terms of human significance, of course, I am nothing, but then God has 'hung the world on nothing'; He stretcheth out the north over the empty place, and hangeth the earth upon nothing. (Job 26:7 KJV). There is a wonderful little saying about Moses; he spent 40 years learning to be a somebody, 40 years learning to be a nobody, and 40 years learning what God can do with a somebody who has learned to be a nobody. You and I are nothing and nobodies; forget all the 'poor self-esteem' cures, we are nothing. But we are very significant nothings, and although we are nothing and have nothing and can give nothing, it still remains true... the Lord hath need of thee.

## Chapter 24

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Four: New Beginnings

and he believed in Jehovah...

Genesis 15 contains one of the most important verses in the Bible. The verse becomes the basis for a major New Testament doctrine; justification by faith. It is sometimes said that Christianity has Jewish roots; this is not strictly accurate. Christianity has Abrahamic roots which is not at all the same thing. Many evangelicals have developed a theology which says believe certain truths, pray certain words, and you are eternally safe. We need to challenge these assumptions.

Please have your Bible open in Genesis 14 while you read this devotional. You will see 21 verses which begin with "and". The next chapter begins "after these things". After what things? Well, the events of chapter 14 obviously but perhaps more than that, perhaps the whole of Abraham's life up to this point. At any rate, Genesis 15:1 marks a clear transition; the events of chapter 15 occur after the events of chapter 14. That may not sound like rocket science but it is an important observation. The events of chapter 15 did not come "out of the blue"; they were part of Abraham's developing experience of God. The verse we are heading for is Genesis 15:6 "and he believed in Jehovah; and he counted it to him for righteousness." But this verse occurs "after these things". The point is that this was not the first step in Abraham's experience of God; it could never have been the first step. The great danger of much modern evangelical practice is to make this the first step; this is a deadly delusion.

revelation

It is important that key verses should be understood in context. Let's examine together the context of Genesis 15:6 under 4 mini-headings; revelation, conversation, elevation, and confirmation. Let's begin with revelation. This chapter begins with a unique revelation from God to Abraham. It is important to notice who takes the initiative; God. The context of Genesis 15:6 is not a gospel meeting, nor an occasion of personal witness, it is a personal revelation from God. After many preliminary events in the life of Abraham, many steps over many years, God spoke to Abraham in a vision. God broke into Abraham's consciousness and he became aware of God's voice. This is what I mean by revelation. Abraham became aware of things that he could never have discovered or calculated; this is the nature of revelation. It was an intensely personal experience, God uses the pronoun "I" and referring to Abraham says "thy"; this is an "I-thou" encounter, no one else is involved. God uses preaching and preachers but in the preaching the hearer must hear God and must meet God. In the revelation/vision Abraham hears the voice of God. This is vitally important as "faith" comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God; faith cannot begin until God has spoken. [Romans 10:17]

In this revelation/vision God reveals Himself to Abraham. He does not promised to give something, or even to do something, He promises to be something. And He put it into the present tense, I am, "faith" can only work with present tenses. The revelation is intensely personal, "I am thy..." After this encounter Abraham would be able to say "Jehovah is my..." Again, my point is that the experience of these truths is not the result of a broadcast but of a personal conversation.

conversation

Let's move on to the second of our mini-headings, conversation. These devotionals always have in mind our series sub-title, "the making of a praying Man". True prayer must always be founded on revelation which has led to conversation. I mean by this, that true prayer is the consequence of ongoing relationship. Genesis is the book of beginnings and this passage of Scripture is an amazing account of the beginning of prayer. This is the first conversation between God and Man in the book. (I don't think we can describe Adam's judgment in Genesis 3 as a conversation) Consider then, just how an amazing this record is. This is the man who became God's Friend in his first conversation with God. How do you read the verses 2 and 3 of this chapter? Read the verses aloud and listen to the tone of your voice. Did you hear petulance, or protest? You have read the verses wrongly, read them again. This is a conversation not a technique for getting something from God. The "possessor of heaven and earth" has just given Himself to Abraham in extravagant promise. There are very few recorded words from God to Abraham so it is not difficult to find out the last thing that God had said?

The last time that God had spoken personally to Abraham is recorded in Gen 13: 14-17. It includes the words "for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth:" Now in Genesis 15 God has spoken to Abraham again. Abraham wants to know what bearing the second revelation has upon the earlier one. Abraham is trying to understand what God is saying; how does this truth fit into the earlier truth? This is good theology! And this is good theological method! He has taken his theological problem to God. How much more we would understand if we would only talk to God about it. Our instinct is to force new revelation into the old boxes. Have you ever noticed how much of the Lord's teaching is given in conversations rather than in sermons? It's not just a question, of course, of theology. Abraham is opening his heart to his friend; his own ache for a "seed" surfaces for the first time during this conversation. It's amazing what we discover about ourselves when we just talk to God. Let's recall the title of this series, Abraham, My Friend. I am concerned when I hear words like 'tactics' and 'strategy' in relation to prayer; these words have little to do with friendship. They fit well into modern Christian ideas relating to Project Management, but then our topic is Abraham, My Friend, not Abraham, My Project Manager.

The implied question in Abraham's conversation is "how shall these things be?" The question was asked by both Mary and Nicodemus, and the answer was always the same; God. Abraham will receive the same answer but it will be good to see how that answer arrived. The first verses of this chapter tell us that the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. But in the next words from God came not in a vision but in a conversation. Let's try to capture the moment. God broke into Abraham's consciousness with a vision and spoke to him. The encounter has developed into a conversation and in the conversation God will lead Abraham into more truth; let him who has ears to hear, hear. This is a genuine two-way conversation. God speaks, Abraham speaks, God

speaks. The Bible gives us sufficient detail to feel the moment. The vision began in the tent and the conversation began there too. Now the two friends will take a little night-air; God leads Abraham outside.

elevation

This brings us to our third mini-heading; elevation. "Now, look up" says Abraham's friend. Or as the KJV has it "look now toward heaven, and tell (count) the stars, if thou be able to number them." Cities suffer from a very modern phenomena call light pollution; it is difficult for modern city dwellers to count the stars. The world's lights make it possible to look down but not up. Profound isn't it? Lights which originate in the world obscure the heavenly lights. UK hymnwriter Graham Kendrick wrote a song highlighting the callousness of modern news coverage. In it he called the camera an "eye without tears", and called the whole process "the world's eye looking at the world's face". We are inundated with information. Sometimes in our prayer meetings we are inundated with information. Sometimes we need to hear God's voice saying, "now come outside, I want to show you something". Information is not revelation. Information does not generate faith, sometimes it obscures it. Sometimes doctrines do not generate faith, they obscure it. Information is only revelation when God says "now look at it".

At your next opportunity leave the city lights behind and head for the hills. If possible do it alone and not in a crowd, and look toward the heavens. Did you ever feel so small and insignificant? There's nothing that "puts us in our place" quite so effectively as standing under a starry sky. A shepherd boy did this three millennia ago in the Judaeen hills; When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained; What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him? (Psalms 8:3-4 NASB) ...and on more than one occasion...The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard. (Psalms 19:1-3 NASB) The starry heavens continued to declare the glory of God. Paul expounded this truth that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: (Romans 1:19-20 KJV) Nowhere are invisible things more clearly seen than in the starry heavens.

Abraham lifts his eyes to the starry heavens, and remembers that God is possessor of heaven and earth, and as he remembers God speaks again, "so shall thy seed be". Is anything too hard for the Lord? In the six-day creation account the stars do not get top billing. In fact their creation is recounted almost as an "aside"; he made the stars also. [Genesis 1:16] He made them, and he continues to own them. Abraham's unasked question is "how shall these things be?" The answer is "because the creator-God says so". This truth needs to find its counterpart in our personal experience. When God first speaks his promise the human instinct is often to become conscious of our helplessness. The spoken word of God makes a new perspective possible. Paul captures the moment in Rom 4: 19-21. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. (Romans 4:19-21 KJV)

## confirmation

Let's turn to our last mini-heading; confirmation. Take careful note of these verses from Romans, they are the Bible's definition of justifying faith. What is faith? If we wanted to give the Bible answer to that question we would begin our reading of the Bible at Genesis. If we did so we would not meet the noun "faith" or the verb "believe" until we reached Genesis 15. This is the Bible's first mention of this concept; it is a good place to dig. The Hebrew word "believe" used in the Genesis 15:6 is aman which means to confirm, and to build up as a column. It means to depend upon something as a building depends upon the foundation. It is the word from which we get "Amen". Abraham establishes himself on the sure foundation of God's word. There is a good illustration in an A B Simpson hymn; the chorus says...

I clasp the hand of love Divine,

I claim the gracious promise mine,

and add to His my countersign,

"I take - He undertakes".

It is an illustration from forgotten banking legislation! In the UK, prior to the 1950s, all cheques (checks) had to be countersigned on the reverse of the cheque by the payee; without the payee's countersign the check was not valid. It was a kind of receipt, the payee acknowledging that he had received the amount of the cheque in cash, or by payment into his account. It is a shame that banking legislation changed, the illustration was perfect. Without my "confirmation" the promise was of no personal benefit to me. Abraham added his countersign; his response to God's promise was a hearty "Amen". The consequences of this countersign were breathtaking, and we will have to save them until the next devotional.

Can we now see the context of this transaction? It begins after these things, that is to say it is not the first step in God's revelation of Himself to Abraham. It begins with a personal "I-thou" encounter initiated by God as he breaks into Abraham's consciousness by revelation. Abraham enters into a conversation with God in which Abraham reveals his own conscious heart longings. The conversation continues as the two friends step outside and Abraham experiences spiritual elevation as he is directed to abandon earth-bound perspectives in favour of the heavenly. The "how" will be the sole responsibility of the Creator. Abraham countersigns the promise in confirmation by resting the full weight of his future destiny upon the words spoken personally to him by God. History's first "Amen" must set the pattern for all others.

## Chapter 25

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Four: New Beginnings

the people of the God of Abraham

“Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings;” wrote William Cowper, “It is the Lord, Who rises with healing in His wings.” Sometimes the same light surprises the Christian while he reads. It happened while reading Psalm 47:9...The princes of the peoples are gathered together To be the people of the God of Abraham: For the shields of the earth belong unto God; He is greatly exalted. (Psalms 47:9 ASV) What an amazing phrase this is...the people of the God of Abraham

Genesis 15 is a defining moment. It is a defining moment in the history of Abraham. It is also a defining moment in the history of believing people. And, most amazingly of all, it is a defining moment in the history of God. Let me illustrate from the Psalm we have already quoted. It refers, in the ASV, to peoples who have become a people; that in itself is an amazing concept but one we cannot examine at this time. We might have expected it to say "the people of God" or "the people of Abraham", but why "the people of the God of Abraham"? The people in Psalm 47 are not being defined by their relationship to Abraham but by their relationship to Abraham's God. Seventeen times in the OT and the NT God is referred to as the "God of Abraham". It is one of God's titles.

God's titles are not distinguishing labels in the manner of our personal names, and they are revelations of his character. The title "the God of Abraham" is a revelation of God's character; God's dealings with Abraham have revealed his character for all time. He is still "the God of Abraham". This is why our study of the life of Abraham is so significant for all Christians; our God is "the God of Abraham" and we are "the people of the God of Abraham". We are not "Abraham's people" but we are "the people of Abraham's God". "Abraham's people" would be his physical descendants in the biblical people of Israel, but "the people of Abraham's God" are those who have shared Abraham's experience. They have met and entered into faith relationship with Abraham's God. I often say that Bible words do not have definitions, they have histories. And the phrase "Abraham's God" and does not have a definition either, but it does have a history and one of the defining moments of the history is Genesis 15. Are we "the people of the God of Abraham"? Answer: Only if we have had our personal experience of Abraham's experience.

Abraham is the Bible's ultimate illustration of faith and Genesis 15 is its clearest focus. For Paul in Romans it is the starting point of his examination of Abraham's relationship with God. He asks, "What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?" (Romans 4:1 KJV) Most people will have heard of Archimedes' famous cry "Eureka"; it means "I have found it". Paul is asking the question 'what did Abraham discover?' He immediately answers the question

by closing in on Genesis 15:6. "If Abraham was declared righteous from his own contributions" says Paul "he has something to boast about." [Romans 4:2] Paul goes on to say that if this were the case God would be morally obliged to declare Abraham righteous; Abraham would have earned his own declaration of righteousness. If this were true salvation would not be God's gift but man's wages; not grace but moral self-sufficiency. Having demolished any possibility of do-it-yourself salvation Paul concentrates on Abraham's faith; "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness". [Romans 4:3] Paul is quoting from Genesis 15:6. In the history of the word 'faith' Genesis 15:6 is a defining moment.

For those who like the technicalities, Abraham believed God could be translated Abraham believed God-wards. Abraham's faith was fixed absolutely in God himself; it was a faith that looked God-wards. He withdrew his gaze from every other possibility, and every past disappointment, and fixed it resolutely on God. The letter to the Hebrews uses the phrase "looking unto Jesus", the NASB has fixing our eyes on Jesus. (Hebrews 12:2 NASB). The word really means 'looking away to Jesus'. Abraham's faith was a faith that looked away from other things and to God; we are defining faith by its history. Paget Wilkes, missionary to Japan, used to define faith by using the word 'faith' as an acrostic; Forsaking All I Trust Him. And he would add, "it takes some Christians a whole lifetime to understand what 'forsaking all' really means." We put our faith in our feelings, or in our experiences, or in a Bible verse, or in faith itself. None of these can save, Abraham believed God-wards and if we are to be "the people of Abraham's God" we must believe in the same way.

Paul gives us more light on Abraham's faith. Abraham believed in God's creative power; (as it has been written, "I have made you a father of many nations") --before God, whom he believed, who makes the dead live, and calls the things which do not exist as though they do exist. (Romans 4:17 MKJV) This is Abraham's faith, and without Abraham's faith we are not "the people of Abraham's God". Let's spell this out. Abraham put his faith in the God who could make dead things alive. I wonder how many modern day 'believers' really believe this? With Abraham this kind of faith was not a luxury but an absolute necessity because Abraham was dead and so was Sarah; And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: (Romans 4:19 KJV) Sometimes we need to repeat a thing again and again. As regards the things that God had promised, Abraham and Sarah could make no contribution; Abraham's body was dead as regards his ability to father a child, and Sarah's womb was the same. Only a life-giving God, who needed no help, could fulfil this promise; Abraham believed in such a God, do we? This is not all, Abraham believed in a God who could create just by speaking; (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. (Romans 4:17 KJV). Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

Let's continue our examination of Abraham's faith. Paul tells us... He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; (Romans 4:20 KJV) Abraham did not doubt the promise of God; to do so would have been to discredit the promiser. Abraham gave glory to God. This phrase has a history too. At the beginning of his letter to the Christians in Rome Paul gives the history of man's defection. He declares that the race did not glorify him as God. [Rom 1: 21] That is to say the race did not acknowledge him as God; we did not credit him with god-ness, we would not allow him to be God to us. Abraham's faith is a complete reversal of this attitude; Abraham believed God. He gave God his rightful place in his thinking. Paul knew

what he was talking about; later in his life it would be put to the test. The supreme moment after the account of the shipwreck in Acts 27 is in verse 25. Paul is surrounded by experts who know better, and by terrifying personal circumstances. But he does not consider the hopelessness of his condition, he declares Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me. (Acts 27:25 KJV). It is the secret of his salvation and his service for God; Paul, like Abraham, believed God. He is staking his life on God's reputation.

Paul's exposition of Abraham's faith continues... And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. (Romans 4:21 KJV) This is Abraham's faith; no contingencies, fully persuaded, all his eggs in one basket. God has identified himself with this kind of faith; this is Abraham's faith and is endorsed by Abraham's God. How different this is to the easy-believism of our day. Abraham's faith is the archetype of 'justifying faith'. He is the father, or the first, of a new people," the people of the God of Abraham". He is the father of all believers. This is the glory of genuine faith and the tragedy of ancient Israel. They had his genes but not his faith; I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you. I speak that which I have seen with my Father: and ye do that which ye have seen with your father. They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. (John 8:37-39 KJV) Or as Paul expressed it... Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. (Galatians 3:6-7 KJV)

It is not the natural seed that is "the people of the God of Abraham" but those who share his faith. There is a wonderful phrase in it Romans 4:13 where Paul refers to Abraham as the "heir of the world". How could Abraham inherit the world? His faith opened up the channel for blessing to the whole world. It is fulfilled in Abraham's Seed, Christ, to whom the Father has repeated the promise; Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. (Psalms 2:8 KJV) But the human link by which this is achieved is Abraham-type faith. By this means the peoples (plural) become the people (singular). ...The princes of the peoples are gathered together To be the people of the God of Abraham: For the shields of the earth belong unto God; He is greatly exalted. (Psalms 47:9 ASV)

Abraham's faith is not just the personal possession of Abraham; it is a particular kind of faith which is illustrated in the life of Abraham. In the Scriptures God constantly draws our attention to Abraham's faith. If we would understand the basis upon which God "justifies the ungodly" [Rom 4: 5] we will need to have a solid understanding of Abraham's faith. Abraham's faith was not just faith in theological propositions, but faith in the person of God himself. It was faith that looked away from every other contingency. It was faith in Someone who could bring life to what was utterly dead. It was faith in Someone who could speak into existence things which be not. It was faith which gave God his rightful place and rested entirely upon God's enabling. And without such faith, irrespective of our theology, sincerity, ingenuity or energy, it is impossible to please God. [Hebrews 11:6]

## Chapter 26

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Chapter Four: New Beginnings

person-to-person

Let's gather up some fragments that remain from this account of Abraham's faith. (New Readers to this column should be warned that the 'fragments which remained' ultimately proved to be more than the original meal!) In our last devotion we examined the phrase 'the people of the God of Abraham'. This time I want to return to the fundamental idea of these verses; these verses define the original Bible concept of faith, the faith of Abraham. It might not be amiss to remind our selves that not all faith is genuine faith. Twice in the letters to Timothy Paul refers to 'unfeigned faith'. Literally it is 'faith without hypocrisy'. There are three things which the New Testament indicates have counterfeits; three qualities which are defined 'without hypocrisy' to distinguish from the fake variety. The three are faith, love and wisdom. [Romans 12:9. 2 Cor 6:6, 1 Timothy 1:5 and 2 Timothy 1:5, James 3:17, 1 Pet 1:22] The word 'hypocrite' in Biblical Greek means an actor. 'Unfeigned faith' is 'faith without pretending'. The reason that Paul referred to 'unfeigned faith' is the sad reality that there is much 'fake faith' on offer, in addition to 'fake love' and 'fake wisdom'. Unlike so much of the variety on show in halls and church buildings all around the world, the genuine articles are never theatrical. They are never 'staged', never intended as a tableau. What is true of one is true of all; like 'genuine love', 'genuine faith' and 'genuine wisdom' never 'vaunt' themselves. Genuine love, faith and wisdom never say 'look at me, look at me' but always 'Behold Him...'

To repeat an earlier devotional, genuine faith is 'God-wards'. Did we examine this passage? Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man. (John 2:23-25 KJV) Modern version struggle with these verses as does the KJV. The same Greek verb 'pisteuo' is used in verses 23 and 24. In verse 23 it is translated 'believe' and, in the KJV, in verse 24 as 'commit. It is a startling statement. 'They believed in His name, but He did not believe them'. Or if we follow the lines of other translations, 'they trusted in him, but He did not trust in them'. They committed themselves to Him but He would not commit Himself to them. The chapter continues with an important statement; He knew what was in man

He did not trust them because He knew them. Even though they had 'a faith' their faith was not the kind that He could have faith in! Did you know that there is a kind of faith which is useless to God; it is not 'load-bearing'. The Hebrew word for faith has this sense of 'load-bearing' built into it. It has links with foundations and pictures of buildings. The building 'rests upon' its foundation; the building 'believes' in its foundation. The foundation must be able to 'support' the building. The

'believers' in John 2:23 had a foundation upon which they were building, but the foundation was not one upon which Christ could build. Their faith could not support what He wanted to build upon it.

Their faith was not the 'genuine' kind. What was wrong with it? The clues are here if we will look for them. They believed because of the signs which He did, and faith in 'signs' can never support the kind of things that Christ's wants to build in our lives. This dependence upon signs became a defining feature of the Jews of Christ's day and was thoroughly rebuked. On one particular occasion He linked their 'hypocrisy' with their demands for this kind of sign. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times? A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And he left them, and departed. (Matthew 16:3-4 KJV) The sign may well be used to attract our attention, but then our dependence must be upon Him. A dependence upon signs and miracles can only produce a faith that is dependent upon signs and miracles. Christ cannot depend upon this kind of faith.

Let's loop back to Abraham for a while; Abraham believed in Jehovah, [Genesis 15:6] Abraham's foundation was being laid upon Jehovah. This is not an amorphous new age god, but 'god' with a particular identity. This is not, unlike the dwellers in Athens, faith in an unknown God but faith in someone known to Abraham. Let me illustrate; a particular feature of 20th and 21st century evangelicalism is the 'altar call'. It presumes the knowledge of certain Bible facts and says, on the basis of these facts, put your faith in Jesus. This is faith in Jesus through facts. Perhaps we need to question whether faith in Jesus through facts is any better than faith in Jesus through miracles. Or more importantly whether or not it produces the kind of faith that He can build on.

Well, how was Abraham's faith different? Abraham had had several encounters with Jehovah. He knew who Jehovah was. (the KJV and its variants indicate where the sacred name of Jehovah has been used by putting a word into upper case letters.) Consequently 'God' is undefined, but GOD is Jehovah. Similarly 'Lord' is undefined' but LORD is Jehovah. By way of illustration... Melchizedek revealed to Abraham the God who was over all; And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: (Genesis 14:19 KJV) but when Abraham addressed the king of Sodom, Abraham put a name to this 'Most High God'; And Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lift up mine hand unto the LORD, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth, (Genesis 14:22 KJV) This was not an oath to an unknown, anonymous, God; it was a 'person-to-person' communication.

It is this person-to-person faith which I want to draw our attention to. The events of Genesis 15 will define the word 'faith' for the rest of the Biblical revelation. Abraham, and this event in particular, will become the Bible's standard illustration of 'genuine faith'. The Chapter begins, appropriately, with a speaking God; After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward. (Genesis 15:1 KJV) Please note that this was not a stranger who spoke to Abraham but the LORD (Jehovah). Abraham knew this person; he knew this voice. He will be able to trust this person because he knows Him; this is not faith in miracles, or in facts, or even primarily in 'the word of God'; Abraham will trust Jehovah. And then we must note how Jehovah speaks. Here is one of my little oddities... I mourn the loss of the second person singular pronouns! In modern English we have lost the use

of 'thee, thou, thy' etc. and the loss is enormous. Whenever someone used the pronoun 'thee' it was a person-to-person call. Sometimes the person's name was audible, as here, "fear not, Abram: I am thy..." But even if the name is not spoken you could always add it. This word is not an anonymous word from an anonymous god to an anonymous human being; it is intensely personal. I can only mean one person; in this instance Jehovah. And thou can only mean one person; in this instance Abraham. This I and thou is absolutely exclusive; it excludes every other being the creation. It is I and thou alone.

Jehovah does not offer to 'do' something for Abraham, nor does He offer to give Abraham something. He declares His determination to 'be' all the Abraham could ever need. And He uses this abiding present "I am". It is the first such self-revelation of God in the history of the world. And it is, and always must be, a revelation. No-one can discover God by searching or by 'drawing logical deductions' from Bible verses; He will have to reveal Himself to 'thee'. Anything that God chooses to 'do' He can choose to 'undo'; one day He made the world, one day He will unmake it. Anything that God gives He may take away. But when God says "I am" it is forever. I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. Malachi 3:6

When God says "I am thy..." that is forever too. God could have said "Abraham, I will give you a shield and I will give you vast riches." But 'shields' can be broken and 'riches' can be wasted. All we ever need in life is a shield and treasure; human beings need nothing more, safety and provision. But this is Jehovah saying "Abraham, I know what you need... Me". Abrahamic faith is person-to-person faith in someone who gives Himself, not just gifts. Miracles are tokens of the God who is willing to give Himself. Our faith is not to be in His gifts but in His self-revealed nature and character. God is prepared to go to great lengths to get us to this place. Jeremiah provides us with a wonderful example. The Lamentations must be one of the most desperate pieces of literature in existence. Jeremiah's world is in ruins. His city is in ruins, his government is in ruins, his religion is in ruins, his theology is in ruins. He pours out his grief in floods of tears and then in the midst of all this brokenness he says; And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the LORD: Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall. My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me. This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. (Lamentations 3:18-24 KJV)

In the midst of his perished 'strength and hope' a revelation is given to him and a testimony is born; the LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him. When everything else had died, Jeremiah discovered that all He ever needed was God; Jehovah is my portion. This is Abrahamic faith; all I need is Jehovah.

Abraham's faith was not ultimately in words or revelations or miracles; it was in Jehovah Himself. Abraham believed in Jehovah; and He reckoned it to him for righteousness. Christ, on earth, was not anxious to hurry men and women into believing; He wanted them to get to know Him. Genuine faith is always person-to-person. To the enquirers who wanted to know where He lived He replied 'Come and see'. [John 1:39] I wonder, do we have the courage to preach this kind of gospel? A gospel that is not anxious to get 'decisions' but which presents Christ in His fullness and says 'come and see'? It was a lesson the disciples learned early; And Nathanael said unto him, Can

there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see. (John 1:46 KJV)

## Chapter 27

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### Chapter Four: New Beginnings

particular responsibility and a look at the accounts

This week's devotional is a little more 'technical'. We are going to see how Paul expounds Abraham's experience. Please don't be put off by that; these are vital truths which will more than repay your having to think a little.

Did you notice that our verse has two 'he's? And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness. (Genesis 15:6 KJV) So we have two named individuals who each perform an action. There is no confusion between the individuals; the first 'he' is Abraham, the second 'he' is Jehovah. There is no confusion either between the different contributions that each 'he' makes to this statement. (If you are tempted to think that this is 'pedantry gone mad' please accept my apologies.) I want to make clear beyond all possibility of confusion that in this verse Abraham had a responsibility which 'he' fulfilled, and Jehovah had a responsibility which 'He' fulfilled. Abraham 'believed' and that was his part 'done'. From that point onwards the responsibility switches in its entirety to Jehovah.

Let me state this in a negative form. Abraham did not contribute any 'righteousness' to this process, and Jehovah did not contribute any 'faith'. We have said before that God needs nothing, other than what He has committed Himself to use. In the earliest verses of the Bible we find that God spoke and it was done. Think in terms of the links of a chain; the first link is God's word; the second is God's action. There is no intrinsic need for any further link in this chain. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. (Genesis 1:3 KJV) But there are times when God has decided to separate the two links and then another link becomes necessary, the link that God has determined must be in place. The 'necessary' link is often a human contribution; God does not 'need' it but He has decided that this is how the process must now move from its beginning to its end. Let's repeat the statement that Abraham contributed no 'righteousness' towards this process; his contribution was his act of believing, his faith.

In our verse we are told that the first 'he', Abraham, believed in Jehovah. Abraham had had earlier experiences with this 'god' called Jehovah; Abraham knew who was speaking to him, and he knew who he was putting his faith in. Jehovah could not move from the spoken word to the completed action until Abraham provided the missing link, because God has decreed that Abraham will be 'saved by grace, through faith'. As you North American folks like to say, 'awesome'! Thomas Newberry drew some interesting thoughts from the way the Hebrew tenses are used. He describes the word 'believed' as an 'Aoristic action'. Properly speaking Hebrew does not have an Aorist tense, but Newberry sees an Aorist mood in the word 'believed'. The Aorist tense is a tense that is often used in Greek to give a sense of a completed act; in this sense Abraham's 'believing' was a single act in which he looked away from all other considerations and fixed his gaze upon the 'god' he knew as Jehovah. It was a response complete in itself; the act was done!

But Newberry also observed that the verb used of God, 'reckoned/counted', was not in this single act mode, but in a mode which indicated the permanence of the action. This is all a little bit complex, but let me 'cut to the chase' by saying that Newberry saw the verse as giving the implication that a single act of Abraham resulted in a permanent response from God; Abraham 'believed' God in a moment of time, and God permanently changed the way He thought about things and changed the record. The KJV version is often anxious to translate words as fully as possible by using different English words to translate the same Hebrew or Greek word; this is good but it sometimes loses the power of simple repetition. The best 'all-round' single word translation here would be 'reckoned'. If you are able, try to trace the Hebrew word 'chashab' (Strong's Number Hebrew 2803) through your Old Testament. It is used to describe the way in which someone 'thinks' about something which then affects the way they behave. Their way of 'seeing' something alters their judgement about something.

The great theme of Romans is really found in its earliest verses; For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. (Romans 1:16 KJV) Salvation is not conditioned by racial history; it is available to both Jew and Greek. It is not achieved by merit; is the result of God's power made available to every believer. It is not difficult to identify Paul's focus. He uses the word 'faith' 40 times and the word 'believe' 21 times. To illustrate from his letter to the Ephesians; For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: (Ephesians 2:8 KJV) God has determined that the human link will be 'faith'. Romans 4 is a vital foundation in New Testament teaching. Paul asks the question 'what was Abraham's experience?' His answer is simple; Abraham found that when he believed God-wards, his faith was reckoned to him for righteousness. (Romans 4:3-5) Abraham's only contribution was his faith.

In fact to make the point beyond any confusion Paul refers to God as Him that justifieth the ungodly (Romans 4:5) It is an audacious statement that excites me every time I read it. The construction is one which describes someone's characteristic behaviour; the 'god' we are referring to is the 'god' who is "The Justifier of the Ungodly". Abraham life story comes before the Law of Moses so his sin was not quantifiable; sin cannot be 'reckoned' when there is no law. Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression. (Romans 4:15 KJV) For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed (reckoned, put to the account) when there is no law. (Romans 5:13 KJV) It is a interesting confirmation of the precision of God revelation in scripture that the narrative of Abraham's life never charges him with sin. However, the fact that sin was not recorded does not mean that sin did not occur. It is just that before the law there was no measurement of sin; it could not be 'scored'. Abraham, for all his greatness, was not a 'godly' man. He had not acquired 'righteousness' that could be put to his account. If he had God's acceptance of him would not have been on the basis of grace but of merit. But Abraham has no merit with which he can earn God's acceptance; he believes. The same construction which gave us 'The Justifier of the Ungodly' describes Abraham's characteristic behaviour; 'he is not a worker, but a believer on The Justifier of the Ungodly. His confidence is not in his achievements but in God alone. God alone will provide the righteousness, Abraham must provide the faith.

As Paul continues to expound 'what Abraham found' he repeats this important truth his faith is reckoned for righteousness (Romans 4:5 KJV) He uses the Greek word *logizomai* which Thayer defines as to reckon, count, compute, calculate, count over. We are using the language of

numbers, the language of the account-ant. Where Abraham's account should have shown a massive overdraft it is found to be infinitely in credit. Where has the overdraft gone and where has this immeasurable wealth come from? This is the ongoing miracle of 'justification by faith'. An amazing two-way transfer of funds has taken place; the debt has gone and a credit Abraham never earned has appeared in his account.

The Roman Catholic church teaches that its 'saints' have not only provided sufficient 'righteousnesses' for their own acceptance but have acquired an excess which can be used to off-set the debt of others; these righteous works of the 'saints' are known as works of supererogation. These credits are administered by the Roman priesthood as a means of reducing time spent in purgatory. This was the theological basis of 'indulgences' offered on payment of cash by the Roman priesthood in the middle ages. It was Luther's rediscovery of God's own righteousness 'reckoned/imputed' to our account on the occasion of our faith that triggered the Reformation. If our acceptance with God were based on personal righteousness, the 'saints' would not have had sufficient to repay their own debts; there would have been no surplus for others. In any case, why would I need the righteousness of Saint Francis when the righteousness of God has been credited to my account?

There is another important point that Paul draws from Abraham's discovery; Abraham was not in covenant with God when this amazing transfer took place. In Bible language he was 'uncircumcised'. Circumcision came to be one of the covenant signs of God's people. The natural descendants of Abraham came to rely upon their historical connections. They were sure that they were accepted with God because they were Abraham's descendants. Paul makes another audacious statement; God reckoned Abraham's faith as righteousness before Abraham had been circumcised. In simple terms, while he was still Gentile.

The implications of this were far-reaching. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; (Romans 3:21-25 KJV) There is no difference, says Paul, on this level between Jew and Gentile (Romans 3:22, 10:12) Acceptance with God is entirely on the basis of faith on our part, and God reckoning that faith as righteousness on His part.

How can God do this thing? His love is a holy love; He can't close His eyes and pretend He can't see. How can God, at one and the same time, be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus? (Romans 3:26 KJV) Is it important to know the answer to such questions? Do we need to understand such things before we are accepted with God? Yes, it is important to know because God has revealed the legal basis on which He has procured our salvation. And 'no, we don't need to understand before we are accepted'. As far as we know Abraham did not understand and that certainly did not prevent his discovery that God had reckoned righteousness to his account. However, the scripture does speak of the "full assurance of understanding" (Colossians 2:2) so in the next couple of devotions we will see how God has worked and its implications for the way we live our lives, and pray that God will use our meditations to settle us in a full assurance.

## Chapter 28

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Justice divine is satisfied

How can God, at one and the same time, be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus? (Romans 3:26 KJV) That was the question we left hanging in the air in the previous devotional. There is a saying used in the UK which says that 'justice must not only be done; it must be seen to be done'. This whole question is 'forensic', that is pertaining to courts of law. God, of course, can do anything He wants to do, but He wants to be accountable for His actions. His workings are not random or arbitrary, and instinctively we know this; this is why we instinctively try to understand Him. And it is why the child inevitably protests that 'it is not fair' when things don't work out the way he thought they should.

The idea of assessment and verdict is integral to God's revelation of Himself. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. (Genesis 1:3-4 KJV). This is our earliest account of God assessing and approving His own works. Everything is tested to check its validity and conformity to His will. Jehovah-Shaphar, The LORD the Judge, (Judges 11:27) is one of the many self-revelations of essential attributes of God's character. Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you, And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him. (Isaiah 30:18 NASB)

This forensic theme emerges constantly in the Bible. God submits Himself to examination and verdict; "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. "What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? (Isaiah 5:3-4 NASB) At times God speaks as though in a court-room; The LORD standeth up to plead, and standeth to judge the people. The LORD will enter into judgment with the ancients of his people, and the princes thereof: for ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. (Isaiah 3:13-14 KJV) God cannot take short-cuts; the sceptre of His kingdom is a sceptre of righteousness. Justice must be seen to be done.

As moral beings God holds us accountable too. Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man. The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, We will hear thee concerning this yet again. Thus Paul went out from among them. (Acts 17:29-33 ASV) The KJV has a quaint translation here; And the times of

this ignorance God winked at But with all this emphasis on justice being seen to be done, can God turn a 'blind eye' and declare a man to be righteous even when all the evidence is against him? Not at all, God knows it is the 'ungodly' that He is declaring to be righteous. How can these things be?

Paul explains God's method of operation in one of the most important passages in the New Testament; Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; (Romans 3:20-25 KJV) God has been able to operate in this way because of a propitiation. Oh no, another jawbreaking word!

Propitiation is a wonderful word and the Bible gives us a beautiful illustration of the way in which it works. It is a very primitive idea but one that we have not outgrown. When, as a child, you broke your mother's favourite vase and picked her some flowers from the garden to get back into her favour, you were operating on a common human instinct. When you grew up and forgot your wedding anniversary and bought a huge box of chocolates to say 'sorry' you were displaying the same instinct. The instinct is that if I have offended someone I may reinstate myself in that persons favour by paying a price.

I said the Bible gives us a beautiful illustration of the truth. It is the story of Jacob's reconciliation to Esau. The Bible, in its usual honesty, lays Jacob's motives wide open. Jacob had schemed his way into Esau's birthright and first-born blessing and Esau had determined to murder him; Jacob fled. Twenty years later Jacob wanted to be restored to his brother. The story is to be found in Genesis 32. Jacob sends a conciliatory message to Esau but is told that Esau is on his way... with a small army; Jacob is terrified, but continues to scheme. He decides to sent a very expensive 'gift' to Esau; 200 she-goats, 20 he-goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 40 cattle, 10 bulls, 20 she-asses and 10 foals. (some box of chocolates this is!) And Jacob's thinking is transparent. I will appease him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me. (Genesis 32:20) He is buying his way back into Esau's favour. He hopes the gift will appease, bring peace, between him and his estranged brother. He hopes to look Esau in the eye and be reconciled. This gives us our illustration of propitiation; the price paid to remove the offence and to open the way for reconciliation. I won't spoil the story by telling more; read it when you have a moment to spare.

Pagan religion is full of sacrifice. The hope is to 'appease' an angry god by means of paying the right price. The instinct is a true one but all the data is wrong. The true God is not angry in an arbitrary fashion; He cannot be 'appeased' by slaughtered animals, or by treasure houses of wealth. The gulf which opened up between God and man is too great to be spanned by any earthly gift. The offence is greater than he can imagine and the price utterly beyond human reach. Is man lost then forever; locked in his estrangement from an angry God? No, a price has been paid which completely satisfies all the righteous requirements of an offended God. The provider of the

propitiation was God Himself, and the propitiation which He gave was nothing less than the life of His Son. We sometimes say that 'Jesus paid the price'; if we want to be theologically accurate we should say 'The Father paid the price, and the price that He paid was His Son.'

It was through the eternal Spirit that Christ offered Himself without blemish to God (Hebrews 9:14) and that eternal sacrifice has infinite reach. When my family was younger we would take day trips to places. I recall a visit to Madame Taussaud's in London. Access was gained through a turn-style on payment of the due price. My family were used to this routine; we joined the line. Four older children, Mum, Dad, and the three little ones. An official was superintending the turn-style and when the four older children arrived let each one through without payment. Was she breaking the law to allow this; no not really. You see, she had seen the father coming with the money in his hand. I had sufficient to pay the entrance price for those before me and those behind me. She 'overlooked' those ahead of the price-payer, looking over them to the certainty that the price would be paid in full by the father. Those behind were all given access without payment too for the price was now paid.

How could God let the 'ungodly Abraham' through? He saw the Man coming with the full price in His hands. A price so complete that it stretches from the beginning of the human race to the end of it; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood, to show his righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God; (Romans 3:24-25 ASV) The eternal sacrifice has infinite reach. Its effects reached to Abraham, and to me and to the farthest corners of the earth.

My righteousness could never have been sufficient to satisfy the just demands of a Holy God, but Christ's righteousness life poured out in willing sacrifice has done so. In response to genuine faith God reckons His own righteousness to the account of the believer, and declares that he is 'right with God. The indigenous people of Papua New Guinea created a language known as 'pigeon English' in which they used English words with their own tribal idioms. It produces such wonders as 'finger-belong-foot' for the word 'toe' and many others. It was sheer inspiration which caused them to translate the word 'justified' in a biblical sense as 'God, Him say me OK'. The theological implications of this little phrase are amazing; justification is God's pronouncement' in the law court' that the accused is right with God and that there is no sentence to follow. He walks from the court a free man. The books show that God's righteousness has been credited to his account.

God is, at one and the same time, both Just and the Justifier of the believer in Jesus. (Romans 3:26) As always, Wesley said it so much better...

'Tis finished! The Messiah dies,

Cut off for sins, but not His own:

Accomplished is the sacrifice,

The great redeeming work is done.

'Tis finished! all the debt is paid;

Justice divine is satisfied;

The grand and full atonement made;  
God for a guilty world hath died.  
The veil is rent in Christ alone;  
The living way to heaven is seen;  
The middle wall is broken down,  
And all mankind may enter in.  
The types and figures are fulfilled;  
Exact is the legal pain;  
The precious promises are sealed;  
The spotless Lamb of God is slain.  
The reign of sin and death is o'er,  
And all may live from sin set free;  
Satan hath lost his mortal power;  
'Tis swallowed up in victory.  
Saved from the legal curse I am,  
My Savior hangs on yonder tree:  
See there the meek, expiring Lamb!  
'Tis finished! He expires for me.  
Accepted in the Well-beloved,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
I see the bar to heaven removed;  
And all Thy merits, Lord, are mine.  
Death, hell, and sin are now subdued;  
All grace is now to sinners given;  
And lo, I plead the atoning blood,  
And in Thy right I claim Thy heaven!

## Chapter 29

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

Oh the blessednesses...

Perhaps you think we are a little pre-occupied with this simple phrase; For what saith the scripture? And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness. (Romans 4:3 ASV) I hope not. Justification by faith is in many ways the foundation doctrine of the New Testament. It is not the only truth but all the others need this as their foundation because this is the basis on which God deals with men and women. He has 'credited' men and women with His own righteousness at the point of their faith. Please note I do not say 'on the basis of their faith'. Salvation is not by faith; it is by grace through faith. Salvation is God's work but the channel that God has appointed to get that salvation to me is 'faith'. Abraham is a particularly useful starting point because it was while he was in his uncircumcised state that his faith is credited as righteousness, (Romans 4:5 NASB) That is to say he has no inherent advantage of any kind; he has no covenant relationship at this time. All he has is overwhelming confidence that God is utterly reliable. But let's see if we can enlarge the picture a little.

Pale blue light is produced in certain circumstances by passing an electric current through a heated element in neon gas, but if you pass the same current through an element in sodium gas you get yellow light. God's truth can be expressed in different ways at different times. In Romans 4 Paul asks the question; What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? (Romans 4:1 KJV) and we have our answer in the next few verses. As Paul continues we shall change the environment and see justification by faith in different colours. Let's ask the question what shall we say that David found? Bible students sometimes refer to a 'locus classicus' it means 'an authoritative and often-quoted passage'. On the topic of justification by faith Romans 4 is a 'locus classicus'; we cannot understand the implications of this teaching without this chapter. Paul begins with Abraham but he doesn't end there; he now draws in David's testimony; Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, (Romans 4:6 KJV); 'describes' is just 'speaks about'.

This is significant because, unlike Abraham, David lived under the period of the Law. In Abraham we find 'justification by faith' in the experience of a man 'not under law', but in David we have the testimony of a man 'under the law'. Psalm 32 is a 'maschil', a didactic (teaching) song intended not just for the momentary enjoyment of a 'good sing' but to be meditated upon. Paul says that this psalm is the experience of someone who has been justified by faith. Let's join Paul in his meditation. Often the New Testament will give us a definitive explanation of the Old; this is such an instance. But this is the experience 'passing through' a different era and it will produce different colours. David's testimony will be expressed in very different terms to Abraham's although, according to Paul writing in the Spirit, this is the same experience.

As the 'electric current' of justification by faith 'passes into the medium' of the Law its effect is described in different language. Did you notice what the scripture recounted as regards 'sins' in its narrative of Abraham? You are right! Not a word. There is no mention of 'sin' in the whole history of Abraham. This is not an oversight, it is simply because ...sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. (Romans 5:13 ESV) This does not mean that Abraham was without sin, but that 'sin was not charged to his account'. Abraham was 'ungodly' but his faith was 'reckoned as righteousness'. (Romans 4:5) David's case was very different. Psalm 32 is extremely 'sin conscious'; I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah. (Psalms 32:5 KJV). Abraham never used this kind of language. But Psalm 32 is not only 'sin conscious' it is wonderfully 'blessing conscious'. The literal translation is brimming with joy; Oh the blessednesses of he whose transgression is carried away, whose sin is hidden. Oh the blessednesses of he to whom Jehovah does not charge iniquity... (Psalms 32:1,2)

It is this word does not charge, 'does not impute/reckon' that provided Paul with his link. It is the word used in Genesis 15:6; Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (NASB) David knew that Jehovah had not recorded his sin against him; oh the blessednesses of a bank account statement that has not had my sin charged to it! Those familiar with accounts will know that the 'item' must have gone somewhere; it can't just vanish out of the system. If it was not 'charged' to David's account, whose account was it charged to?

There is a beautiful cameo in the little letter of Paul to Philemon which will give us an insight. Philemon was a prosperous house-holder in Colosse; he was also one of Paul's converts; and so was Onesimus. Onesimus was Philemon's runaway slave who had come to Christ through Paul while Paul was imprisoned. (I'm looking forward to hearing Onesimus' testimony one day; it must have been fascinating.) Paul now sends Onesimus home to Philemon with the instruction that Philemon must treat him no longer as a slave but as a brother. The little letter contains this additional comment; But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; (Philemon 1:18 NASB) Now this is what happens when the love of God is shed abroad in the heart of a man; he begins to behave as God would, instinctively. This, of course, is exactly what God has done. Who will bear the world's sins? Who will carry the responsibility before the Justice of God? "I will", says the Son, "charge it to my account". And then the account was 'paid in full'; that was the technical meaning of 'τετελεισται', it is finished. (John 19:30)

So David knows that his iniquities have been charged to the account of another. Revealed truth is progressive and single seeds of revelation often spring up and blossom into fuller revelation. Abraham knew his faith was reckoned as righteousness; David saw that his own sins had been reckoned to another's account. Oh, the "blessednesses" of such a revelation. Others in the time of the Law saw it and expressed in ways which are now familiar to us; But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-6 KJV)

David used other language that was key to the era of Law in which he lived. Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven... (Psalms 32:1 KJV) This word 'forgiven' is *naṣaḥ*; it means to lift up or carry away, but David had something quite specific in mind. What he had in mind was an annual

ritual that was actually suspended during his own lifetime. From the time that the Ark was taken in battle by the Philistines it remained separated from the Tabernacle and the Altar of Sacrifice; this separation of the ark and the altar lasted until Solomon reunited them and meant that from Samuel to Solomon much of the Levitical worship was in abeyance. What he had in mind was a particular moment in the ceremony; and the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a solitary land; and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:22 ASV) The word 'bear' is נָשָׂא. It seems that although David knew the Scapegoat had not carried away his sins, he still knew the "blessednesses" of sins carried away. Later John Baptist would put words to the revelation; The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh (lifts up/bear away) away the sin of the world. (John 1:29 KJV)

Imagine an Israelite of old. Their consciences could never be at rest but the symbols told of sins removed and fellowship with God restored. Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:21-22 NASB) There were two goats which in the symbolism represent one. This is what the Bible students call 'substitutionary atonement'; the goat becomes the substitute for the people. The first goat died; the evitable consequence of sin. In confession and laying of hands the High Priest conveyed the sins of the people onto the head of the second or (e)scapegoat; the sins no longer rested on Israel but on the goat. Their sins were united with the goat. From now on whatever happens to the goat happens to their sins. Their sins are borne away into the wilderness, away from God's presence and theirs. It would seem that David never saw this ceremony, and yet he experienced the "blessednesses" of iniquities carried away. There can be no genuine legal 'justification' unless sins are actually dealt with. This is not play-acting or a legal fiction. The death penalty has been exacted on the first goat; the second now, symbolically, bears away Israel's sins. God can only reckon righteousness to our account because the penalties have been paid; justification by faith and substitutionary atonement are integral to each other. These truths are great tests for orthodox Christianity.

There's more; Blessed is he whose transgression is carried away, whose sin is hidden. (Psalms 32:1 Lit) This introduces another powerful picture from the era of the Law; symbolically, sins could be covered/hidden. The ceremony of the two goats was known officially as יוֹם כִּפּוּרִים; the day of atonement/covering. It is the picture of something unacceptable being covered so that peace becomes possible. And say ye moreover, Behold, thy servant Jacob is behind us. For he said, I will appease him with the present that goeth before me, and afterward I will see his face; peradventure he will accept of me. (Genesis 32:20 KJV); 'appease' is the word 'kaphar' meaning 'atone or cover'. If the 'bearing away' points to sins dealt with, the whole purpose of the 'atonement/covering' was to effect a reconciliation that made it possible for God to fellowship with His people for one more year. It's interesting how this idiom of 'covering' persists to our own day. "who will pay the debt?" "this will cover it". As a result of the death and sending away of the goats the people of Israel were 'covered' and God's presence in their midst would not destroy them.

So we can see that forensic justification is not a rabbinic mind-game but part of a comprehensive revelation that God has provided a thoroughly safe means for the sinner to appear in His presence

without fear. His iniquities have been carried away by Calvary's Sacrifice; as a result his sins are hidden and not charged to his account. Every angle has been 'covered'. We may not understand all the implications but those who put their faith in God will have this testimony... Oh the blessednesses...

## Chapter 30

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man

from grace to grace

Just a final catch-up as regards Abraham and justification by faith and then we will move on to later steps in his pilgrimage.

The best exposition of the verse And he believed in Jehovah; and he reckoned it to him for righteousness. (Genesis 15:6 ASV) is, as we have already said, the letter to the Romans. Did I mention that William Tyndale regarded Romans as the best possible introduction to the Old Testament? This is an ancient wisdom which was known by Augustine; "The New is in the Old concealed. The Old is in the New revealed.". This truth is sometimes reversed by modern Bible students who declare that we cannot understand the New Testament without studying the Old; it is, of course, a question of emphasis. We need to take care that in de-Greecing the Church we don't run into the opposite error of Hebra-ising the New Testament. Paul will expound Abraham for us; not the other way around.

Abraham, says Paul, is the 'father of all believers' irrespective of their ethnic histories. (Romans 4:11,12) There is one aspect of Abraham's faith which we will return to for this last visit to a 'series within a series'. Abraham believed God (Romans 4:3) Abraham's faith was not in data about God; it was 'in God'. This has very important ramifications for the evangelical family in the 21st Century. Evangelicals have specialised in 'data about God' and in a very careful exposition of 'justification by faith'. We have created doctrinal statements to ensure that wrong 'data about God' does not get into the family. In some circles we have itemised the doctrine of 'justification by faith' so that it can now be presented in "4 Spiritual Laws". The concern is that although there is nothing wrong with getting right 'data about God' or careful explanations of 'justification by faith', it is possible to get all this right and yet still to miss 'God'.

We do not receive 'justification by faith' because we believe in 'justification by faith'. Please let that statement really sink in. Abraham was not 'reckoned as righteous' because he believed in the doctrine but because Abraham believed God. I wonder how many who respond in meetings are putting their faith in God? An 18th Century evangelical once said; "It is much easier to join oneself to a sect than to God". That is frightening, and true. The purpose of evangelism is not to produce another evangelical but to bring a hearer to put their confidence in God; But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. (Acts 26:16-18 KJV) It was not to change their data about God, although that is necessary.

It was and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. The 'destination' on the front of the 'gospel bus' is not an improved theology, or even forgiveness of sins and an inheritance. The destination is not 'justification by faith', the destination is 'faith that is in me'; the destination is God.

Let me illustrate by tracing this truth through Romans 4. The first reference is our current starting point; Abraham believed God (Romans 4:3) There are three more pointers to the same vital truth:

2. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. (Romans 4:4-5 KJV)

3. (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. (Romans 4:17 KJV)

4. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; (Romans 4:23-24 KJV)

This last point states our case very clearly; 'righteousness is reckoned in we believe in Him; I am trying here to draw attention to the ground of faith; it is Him. An old hymn-writer captured the idea;

"My faith has found a resting place,

Not in device or creed;

I trust the Ever-living One,

His wounds for me shall plead."

Did you ever notice the point at which the Galatians began to go wrong? I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. (Galatians 1:6-7 KJV) They switched (removed/transposed) from a 'Him' to an 'it'. All 'its' are as deadly as each other. If we switch our faith from 'Him' to prayer, evangelism, revival, bible reading, quiet times, church governance, sanctification, whatever... we become ,...foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? (Galatians 3:1 KJV). The Bible seems to reserve the description of 'fool' for those who leave God out of their thinking; people who have something other than Jesus Christ 'before their eyes'. They are, says Paul, bewitched, and the enchantment with other things always begins when we take our eyes off Him.

Before we move on there is another important thing to note about 'justification by faith'; it is not an end in itself but an entrance into what God has prepared. Justification and reckoned righteousness, says Paul, is of faith, that it might be by grace (Romans 4:16). This is stated very clearly in other places; For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: (Ephesians 2:8 KJV). Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: (Romans 3:24 KJV) But grace is more, much more, than 'unmerited favour'; it is

also God's enabling power. However, we need grace to enable us to access grace. And of his fullness have all we received, and grace for grace. (John 1:16 KJV) is better translated as in Jay P. Green, Sr's Literal Translation... And out of His fullness we all received, and grace on top of grace. (John 1:16 LITV) This is grace replaced by more grace.

Let me make the point by trespassing into Romans 5. Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1-2 KJV) At this point Paul is not referring to Abraham and his experience but to us and ours; the 'he' of Abraham became a 'we' in Romans 4:24. Paul now begins with Abraham but goes beyond him; Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1-2 NASB) In Romans 4 he has concentrated on 'justification by faith' and its basis in 'reckoned righteous' but now he is moving on. Oh that we might all 'move on' into the 'much more' of Romans 5.

As a result of 'having been justified by faith' we have 'peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ'. This is wonderful and not to be hurried, but there is more... 'by whom also'... we have an 'introduction' as the NASB says or more familiarly with the KJV 'we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand'. Justification by faith is a wonderful demonstration of the grace of God, but it is more than that. In this New Covenant it is the open door into 'this grace in which we stand'. Abraham, blessed man though he was, never accessed 'this grace wherein we stand'. He saw Christ's day and was glad but in the 'much more' of the New Covenant he was one of those who ... all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. (Hebrews 11:13 KJV)

It is challenging to notice the repetition of the phrase 'much more' in Romans 5. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. (Romans 5:9-10 KJV) These two verse parallel Romans 5:1,2; they begin with justification and reconciliation but they both take the theme forward by speaking now of 'salvation'. The pattern is very deliberate, justification and reconciliation have been achieved by the cross ; 'his blood' or 'the death of his son'. But 'salvation' is the result of 'his life'. The cross has dealt with the past; His life will determine the future.

His life is available through His Spirit. and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:5 NASB) This is the defining experience of the New Covenant. Paul's question at Ephesus was not 'did you believe correctly' but 'did you receive the Holy Spirit'. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." (Acts 19:2 NASB) It was also Paul's basic axiom and starting point of personal Christian experience; This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? (Galatians 3:2-3 KJV) This is righteousness, not only imputed, but 'much more' so, imparted. Righteousness not only reckoned but received.

The foundation of it all, however, remains 'justification by faith'. God receives us not because of our achievements or experiences but because Christ died... 'for the ungodly'... 'while we were yet sinners'. This wonderful blessing, giving access to so 'much more' is dependent, on man's side, upon a particular kind of faith; Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all, (Romans 4:16 KJV)

It must all begin here in our response; do I have the faith of Abraham?

## Chapter 31

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_31

The Seed - Part 1

As I promised we will now return to the narrative of Genesis 15. There is so much material in this chapter that it is easy to forget that the incidents that it records all took place within a 24 period. It is important, however, not to forget as there is a flow of revelation through this chapter that we ought not to disturb. First a reminder of the events; Abraham has made his choices as to the future source of his life and wellbeing; ... I have lift up mine hand unto the LORD, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth, (Genesis 14:22 KJV). God's response to this is to promise Himself to Abraham; After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward. (Genesis 15:1 KJV). Abraham's thoughts immediately turn to the question of the future; And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. (Genesis 15:3 KJV). If we were to give a title to the chapter perhaps it ought to be 'The Seed'.

We are able to time events easily; they begin in starlight. (15:5). It is in the starlight that ... he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness. (Genesis 15:6 KJV) The subsequent events will pass through mid-day when the rising thermals lifted the vultures aloft (15:11), early evening, when the sun was going down and night again when extraordinary events will take place (15:17)

Following the moment of Abraham's justifying faith, God reminds Abraham of His promise; And he said unto him, I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it. (Genesis 15:7 KJV) Although God had not told Abraham this from the start, it had been in the heart of God. God has wonderful plans for us all, but He often doesn't tell us the details; for some of us it would be a distraction. It is better that Abraham should begin his journey because he obeyed rather than because of any blessing there might be at the end of it. Abraham then asks a significant question; whereby shall I know...? The word 'whereby' in Hebrew is an all inclusive question mark it includes why, how, where, when? It is interesting to ask each of these questions separately and to think about the answers we might give. God's answer is an instruction to prepare for a covenant ceremony.

In Bible use the verb usually used for the creating of a covenant is the word to 'cut'. It enshrines within it a fact almost forgotten in our modern usage, but captured in the letter to the Hebrews in Youngs Literal Translation; for where a covenant is , the death of the covenant-victim to come in is necessary, (Hebrews 9:16 YLT). Where there is a covenant, there must be, of necessity, the death of the covenant-victim. Of course if the 'covenant' is a last will and testament then the covenant-maker must die for it to be enacted, but the Hebrews truth is wider than this and extends to all ancient covenants; without the death of the covenant-victim the covenant could not be

established.

In Bible times the pattern of cutting a covenant was well established. It was based on a self-imprecatory oath; (yes, I thought it was; I hear you say!) English children still use a self-imprecatory oath although they don't realise it. They emphasize a promise by saying 'cross my heart' or in the full version 'cross my heart and hope to die'. It builds an 'if' into the event. If I fail to keep my promise let this happen to me; It is an ancient pattern. Ancient biblical covenants were initiated in an avenue of death. The covenant-victims were slaughtered, and the parts separated into two line. The covenanting parties then met in this little valley of death and declared the conditions of their covenant. All the time the slaughtered animals provided the emphasis for their promises; if I fail to keep my promise let this happen to me. Sometimes these oaths can be observed in the scriptures by noticing unfinished sentences. There is one in Hebrews; For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. (Hebrews 4:3 KJV); as it stands 'if they shall enter into my rest' sits strangely to our ears. Youngs Literal Translation alters the punctuation; for we do enter into the rest--we who did believe, as He said, 'So I swear in My anger, If they shall enter into My rest--;' and yet the works were done from the foundation of the world, (Hebrews 4:3 YLT) This is God saying 'if I let them enter...' the rest of the sentence does not need to be said. It is the equivalent of 'cross my heart...'

Abraham, then, is instructed to set the stage for the cutting of a covenant. The animals are slaughtered and the avenue of death is created; And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon. And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not. (Genesis 15:9-10 KJV). He would have seen this often and no doubt participated in many. He knew what would happen next; the two covenant makers would enter the avenue of death from either end, they would meet in the middle and seal their covenant. Abraham knew what would happen, but it didn't. The whole day passes and the other covenanting party does not arrive. At midday or later the vultures descend and Abraham beats them off. He waits, and waits, and waits...

He did not 'fall asleep' but a ...when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. (Genesis 15:12 KJV) and God began to speak about Abraham's Seed. The next four hundred years of his descendants' history is sketched out for him, with the promise that although tragedy must first come ...in the fourth generation they shall come hither again... (Genesis 15:16 KJV). The avenue of death stands unused; one covenant partner is asleep, the Other has not appeared but has only spoken to Abraham. Abraham continues his deep sleep under the horror of great darkness. He will not be an active covenant partner in what follows but the passive witness of the cutting of a covenant which will set in motion earthly events which will change history and eternity. Abraham is not the first human being to experience this kind of deep sleep; And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. (Genesis 2:21-22 KJV)

Sleeping Abraham now witnesses one of the most mysterious events in the Bible; two phenomena pass between the slaughtered animals. In my imagination I see them approaching each other from

opposite ends; a smoking furnace and a flaming torch. What is this that Abraham is witnessing? The smoking furnace is an emblem of God in all His holiness; the furnace smokes, our God is a consuming fire. The flaming torch is the Life that was the light of men, shining in the darkness. Father and Son walk together in the valley of death and seal their covenant; Abraham is witnessing Calvary. He sees no cross; it would have meant little to him, but the horror of a great darkness has fallen upon the earth and Abraham is witnessing it.

This is not Abraham's covenant; he never did step into that avenue of death. This is an eternal covenant; sealed at the scene of the covenant-victim's death. Eternity has broken through the thin skin of time and eternal events are being portrayed in his dreamless sleep. In real-time, as we call it, the covenant-victim would not die until April AD 30 but in real-time, as God calls it, He is ... the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. (Revelation 13:8 KJV). God did indeed make a covenant with Abraham on that day, but this was not it. Abraham's name is not on this event as one of the covenanting parties, but as the witness.

In Romans Paul seems to concentrate on Abraham's experience in the first half of Genesis 15; reckoned righteousness. But in Galatians the focus is different; Paul concentrates on the covenant of the second half of Genesis 15. This is most obvious in a few verses; Galatians 3:16-19. In verse 16 Paul declares that these events had in focus not 'seeds' as in the sense of Abraham's many descendent, but 'seed' singular... Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. (Galatians 3:16 KJV) This speaks, if you follow the line of thought, of promises made by God to Christ. According to Paul the focus of the events that Abraham witnessed was Christ, the Seed. As he continues on this theme. Again the point comes through clearly in Youngs Literal Translation as Paul adds and this I say, A covenant confirmed before by God to Christ, the law, that came four hundred and thirty years after, doth not set aside, to make void the promise, (Galatians 3:17 YLT). And, just in case we need further evidence, the theme is repeated; Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. (Galatians 3:19 KJV); Paul speaking of 'the seed, who should come, to whom the promise was made'.

But what was the promise that was made to the Seed? Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you. (John 16:13-15 KJV). It was a mystery enshrouded in an enigma to the disciples for the time being, but when the Spirit came Peter saw immediately all the implications; Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. (Acts 2:33 KJV) and Paul wasn't far behind; Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:13-14 KJV).

The Holy Spirit is the great executor of Christ's Will and Testament. All that was agreed and witnessed is assured. Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith

of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness; In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began; (Titus 1:1-2 KJV). Did you ever ask this question? If this 'eternal life' was promised 'before the world began' to whom was the promise made?

## Chapter 32

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_32

The Seed Part 2

For me Bible study often begins with an 'idea, or hunch, or revelation'. (Choose whichever you think most appropriate.) I then 'destruction test' the idea by thinking through parallel passages or passages which have the same idea or words. I will then consult the commentaries or the systematic theology textbooks. I check the original texts, as I am able. If I find a fatal flaw I abandon the 'revelation'. If I find no 'fatal flaws' I put it on a back-burner and return to it from time to time. If it still seems to hold up I regard it as a working hypothesis and at some time it will creep into the preaching. It is important not to treat the idea as a terrier treats a bone. I must not shake it until I get something out of it and I must be prepared to drop it if necessary; there is a fine line between passion and obsession. I sometimes bounce the ideas off my friends, so this is where you come in...

I tried to make the point in the last devotional that Abraham was not the prime beneficiary of the events that took place in Genesis 15. In the 'cutting of the covenant he took no active part'; in our language, his signature was not on the document, but the scripture records And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold, a smoking furnace, and a flaming torch that passed between these pieces. In that day Jehovah made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates: (Genesis 15:17-18 ASV) The covenant was 'with Abraham' but the beneficiary was Abraham's Seed; this can be both singular and plural so it could equally be applicable to the Christ-Seed or the Abraham's progeny.

Here is the idea, and it comes from Hebrews; Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:14-17 KJV) This passage speaks of the incarnation and its necessity in providing the human qualification for Christ's priesthood. As the NASB has it: Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:17 NASB)

The writer to the Hebrews has already stated that Christ is greater than the angels, and that He is identified with 'man' and for a little while made lower than the angels. (Hebrews 2:7) In the later verses he states that For truly He did not take the nature of angels, but He took hold of the seed of

Abraham. (Hebrews 2:16 MKJV). This was the verse that caught my attention. In following the line of the argument I would have expected it to say 'he took hold of the seed of Adam' in contrast to 'he did not take hold of angels', but he didn't; he suddenly introduces Abraham. Adam's seed (or Eve's) would have meant the whole human race, but Abraham's Seed is a well established idea in the New Testament. It could refer to God's apprehending of the descendants, physical and spiritual, of Abraham, but the next verse shows we are still talking about the incarnation. So why speak of 'Abraham's Seed' rather than Adam's?

Let's return to our source; And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. (Genesis 15:12 KJV) I cannot read this without thinking about Adam's great sleep; And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; (Genesis 2:21 KJV) Without Adam's aid or consent, God took one of his ribs and 'built' it into a woman. The rib was Adam's; God took it, held it, transformed it, and gave it back to Adam as his wife.

Was it during Abraham's deep sleep that God 'took hold of Abraham's Seed'? I am not thinking of the mechanics of reproduction here, but of a mystery captured in the event of a moment. As he slept God put his indelible mark upon Abraham's Seed. In an eternal moment He took hold of the essence of Abraham which would have to pass down the generations before becoming manifest in Christ. In his sleep-vision Abraham saw two phenomena; the smoking furnace and the flaming torch. Did Abraham recognise what he saw? Did he know he was watching God, the Consuming Fire and the Eternal Flame who would become his own Seed? Did he understand the 'horror of darkness' that eclipsed his senses as the Two walked alone in the avenue of death? Did he know that heaven's covenant was being restated on earth in Abraham's presence? Did he know that heaven touched earth, and eternity had broken into time? I have no answer, except to say that Abraham saw Christ's day and rejoiced in it. According to Matthew, this is the starting point; The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1 KJV)

Both Adam's sleep and Abraham's are parables of the cross. As Christ entered His deep sleep of death His side was pierced, in fulfilment of Adam's living prophecy. From this death-sleep there came a bride for the Second Man. And the language is the same; Adam's rib is 'built' into a woman; husbands love your wives even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; (Ephesians 5:25 KJV) For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. (Ephesians 5:30-31 KJV) His promise is to 'build' this church that came from His opened side.

In Abraham too, we have our parables of the cross. It is in the place of valley of death that the Seed is made sure. Yet it pleased Jehovah to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of Jehovah shall prosper in his hand. (Isaiah 53:10 ASV). On the cross, he saw his seed. The covenant of Calvary guaranteed it. The precision of this Isaiah verse is wonderful; when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, When the Father made his soul an offering for sin, the Son 'saw' his seed. Does that sound too fanciful? The story is found in Psalm 22.

The first half of Psalm 22 is the 'horror of darkness'. The mood is dark and brooding; relentless in its pain and abandonment. But half way through verse 21 the mood changes dramatically; Save

me from the lion's mouth; Yea, from the horns of the wild-oxen thou hast answered me. I will declare thy name unto my brethren: In the midst of the assembly (church) will I praise thee. (Psalms 22:21-22 ASV) and the focus now is not the pain but the seed; Ye that fear Jehovah, praise him; All ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him; And stand in awe of him, all ye the seed of Israel. (Psalms 22:23 ASV)

This was the purpose of it all; ... who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.... (Hebrews 12:2 KJV). As Isaiah expresses the same wonderful truth; He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. (Isaiah 53:11 KJV) He travailed and brought forth sons. He 'saw' and He was 'satisfied'. All the strands are flowing together here; substitution, atonement, justification just as they all flowed together on the day that Abraham believed and was reckoned righteous, slept and witnessed the ratifying of an eternal covenant; And to Abraham and to his Seed the promises were spoken. It does not say, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, "And to your Seed," which is Christ. (Galatians 3:16 MKJV)

This was the Seed; the single seed. And Jesus answered them, saying, The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. (John 12:23-24 KJV). So the Seed must step into the avenue of death, or abide alone. But if it passes through death and burial it will bring forth much fruit. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:27-29 KJV)

## Chapter 33

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_33

ready, steady, wait

It is amazing to see how often exhilarating mountain top experiences are followed by the testings in the valley. Paradise and Adam's receiving of his wife is followed by his testing by Satan. David's final conquest of his enemies and his enthronement is followed by his testing regarding Uriah's wife. Elijah's triumph over the priests of Baal is followed by his testing in the face of Jezebel's death threat. Peter's supreme moment of revelation in Matthew 16 is followed by the most devastating rebuke in history. The awesome experience of the transfiguration mount is followed by the test in the valley with the demoniac. Spurgeon used to tell the story of a trainee mountaineer who scaled a Swiss peak in the company of his guide. In a moment of exhilaration he stood upright on the mountain's summit and was immediately buffeted by the mountain winds. "Down" cried the guide "down on your knees, for God's sake, man. It's the only safe place up here on the mountain top".

To pass from Genesis 15 into Genesis 16 is to pass from the mountain top into the depths of a deep valley. How could this have happened to Abraham, God's friend? How could he have missed the track so soon? There is a telling juxtaposition of ideas in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians ;Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:11-13 KJV) The truth can be expressed in a single statement; never forget your frailty and God's faithfulness. There's a helpful reminder too here of one of the purposes of the scripture; Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition... Their disasters were recorded for our benefit.

We left Abraham in his deep sleep, watching and listening to deep mysteries. He awoke and normal life resumed. This is what Oswald Chambers would have called 'the test of the mundane'. Abraham had witnessed amazing things and then... nothing happened. That day came to an end and the next began and ...nothing happened. Does this sound familiar? He has received wonderful revelation but life just goes on... The narrative of Christ's life has a thrilling glimpse of his audience with the nation's teachers; he was twelve years old. He had a sense of stewardship and the knowledge of His true father. He knew the will of God better than any in the land, and for the next 18 years he swept up woodshavings in Joseph's carpenter's workshop. Strange, aren't they, God's ways of doing things? We get folks all hyped up and we say 'go, go, go'. God overawes us with stupendous revelation and says 'now wait'.

Sarah's biological clock is ticking, and so is Abraham's. Time is passing something must be done. Frustration is me wanting to be God. It is an expression of the instinct 'not thy will be done, but mine'. Beware the impulse to 'do something'. Here's a little linguistic trivia; the relatively new Hebrew word "frustration" did not appear in Hebrew until the mid-seventies, and in fact, before it was absorbed into the language, people who spoke only Hebrew were never "frustrated". They may have been "angry" or "disappointed" but never "frustrated". It is a pity it ever appeared in the English language; it conceals the truth. Try this; the next time you are tempted to "frustration" use a different word. Use the word 'angry' or 'disappointed'. Then ask the question, "with whom am I angry/disappointed". You may well find that the answer is 'God'. Beware the temptation to 'have to do something, because nobody else will'; it may mean God isn't doing this, so I will. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. (James 1:19-20 KJV)

The amazing thing is that Sarah knew that it was God who had closed her womb; And Sarai said to Abram, Behold now, Jehovah has shut me up, that I do not bear. Go in, I pray thee, to my maidservant: it may be that I shall be built up by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. (Genesis 16:2 Darby). It can be such a temptation to 'break out' when God 'has shut you up'. The word translated 'shut up' here is 'enclosed' (■a■tsar). It is good to trace the Old Testament use of this word. It is the word used to describe God's will at work; And then the LORD'S wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you. (Deuteronomy 11:17 KJV) or the role of a shepherd-king; When Samuel saw Saul, the LORD said to him, "Behold, the man of whom I spoke to you! This one shall rule over My people." (1 Samuel 9:17 NASB). Literally, in the last case, he shall enclose my people. Here's another little nugget; Job and Satan came to God with the same complaint. Satan said; Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. (Job 1:10 KJV). Job said; Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, and whom God hath hedged in? (Job 3:23 KJV). Here Satan and Job bring the same complaint; God has 'enclosed' Job. Satan says "it's not fair I can't in" and Job says "it's not fair, I can't get out". It was a unique privilege of Israel that God ... planted a vineyard, and set an hedge about it... (Mark 12:1 KJV) God had 'hedged in' Sarah, but she found a way out and the name of the escape route was 'Hagar'.

There was nothing wrong, morally, with this expediency; not in that day and culture. Sarah could legitimately 'build up' her family through her slave girl. And Abraham's action too was not immoral according to his day and light; Hagar became his 'wife'; (Genesis 16:3) The folly of this action was caused by a combination of Sarah's determination and Abraham's passivity. An English writer once wrote that "there is almost nothing that is impossible to a determined woman"; you understand that I am just quoting this writer's observation. (my wife reads these columns ■) In fact, I agree with it, and I mean nothing defamatory to woman when I say it. A woman often seems to have a capacity for tenacity which is extraordinary. Shall I illustrate my point? How many women have 'stood by their man' when he has become an abusive drunkard? How many men have done the same for their woman? I rest my case. Tenacity is a great virtue unless it is another name for stubbornness. It was tenacity added to rebellion that brought down Israel's first king; For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected

the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king. (1 Samuel 15:23 KJV) Saul's first sin was 'refusing to wait', his second was 'finding a way of doing what he wanted' when God had said otherwise. His was Adam's story, and Sarah's, repeated.

Over a thousand years after Abraham and Sarah's do-it-yourself solution Isaiah brought a significant word for God's people; Woe to the rebellious children, saith Jehovah, that take counsel, but not of me; and that make a league, but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin, that set out to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to take refuge in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the strength of Pharaoh be your shame, and the refuge in the shadow of Egypt your confusion. (Isaiah 30:1-3 ASV) This is a graphic description of Judah trying to find a solution to her problems. They have turned to the man-made solutions of Egypt and, supreme folly, have not asked at my mouth. All the time, God had a word for them; For the Egyptians shall help in vain, and to no purpose: therefore have I cried concerning this, Their strength is to sit still. (Isaiah 30:7 KJV) But Judah would not listen; their plans were made. For thus saith the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not. But ye said, No; for we will flee upon horses; therefore shall ye flee: and, We will ride upon the swift; therefore shall they that pursue you be swift. (Isaiah 30:15-16 KJV). That word is like the sounding of the death knoll; But ye said, No. In Matthew it became Israel's epitaph; O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. (Matthew 23:37-38 KJV) ...how often I would... and ye would not.

For Judah God's word had a gracious and ironical conclusion; And therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for the LORD is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for him. (Isaiah 30:18 KJV) God had said 'wait, but Judah had said "No"', so now God says 'I will wait'. It was God's unspoken word to Abraham and Sarah too. God ignores Sarah's stratagems, and ignores the notion that Hagar is Abraham's 'wife'. He address Hagar in the way He had always seen her. Sarah's quick fixes are ignored. Hagar is still "Hagar, Sarah's maid" [Genesis 16:8]

Contrary to their intentions Abraham's and Sarah's intention to speed things up may even have delayed them. There is an ominous time gap here; there are 13 silent years in the white space between Genesis 16 and Genesis 17. Although there is an element of chastening in the wait God's intention is still to bless. He can out-tenacity a Sarah and an Abraham. therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you. As God seeks to make us praying men and women we shall need to be sure that we don't mistake God's silences for his assents. Blessed are they that wait for Him. [Isaiah 30:18]

## Chapter 34

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_34

Abrahamic Perfection

I want to say more about Genesis 16 but I think it will make more sense if we revisit later rather than try to look too far ahead. In essence, Ishmael was 'fathered' by 'uncircumcised energy'. Such children can have long lives and long term consequences. We will need to understand the significance of circumcision and its institution in Genesis 17 before we can fully understand why God works this way. Watch this spot; we'll be back...

Let me put Genesis 17:1,2 into context. It is pre-law and pre-circumcision. This may give us some valuable insights into the New Covenant, which is post-law and post-circumcision. We may even get some insights into why John Wesley called his exposition of the New Covenant, Christian Perfection. So here is a little examination of Abrahamic Perfection based on a single verse: And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, Jehovah appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be thou perfect. (Genesis 17:1 ASV).

God is about to 'cut a covenant' with Abraham, personally. Most of this covenant will be expressed in terms of what God undertakes to do, with some very simple instructions for Abraham. We often call this the Abrahamic Covenant, but, strictly speaking, that is to get the cart before the horse; God calls this covenant 'my covenant'. Nine times in this single chapter God refers to it as 'my covenant'. It is an intensely personal covenant; And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly (Genesis 17:2 KJV) This is not a corporate covenant of the kind that was enacted at Sinai; that covenant was not addressed to a 'thee' but to 'you'. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be mine own possession from among all peoples: for all the earth is mine: (Exodus 19:5 ASV) (Such vital details are one the reasons I am still using the King James Version; just temporarily, until I can find something better.) This is a between me and thee covenant.

So the Abrahamic Covenant is between just 2 persons; it is always between two persons, but we will examine this at another time. Abraham is one covenanting party, who is the other? Let's allow Him introduce Himself. And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, Jehovah appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be thou perfect. (Genesis 17:1 ASV). This is Jehovah. It was Jehovah who had first spoken and revealed Himself to Abraham. It was Jehovah to whom Abraham had raised his altars and upon whose Name he had called. It was Jehovah who had given Himself to Abraham to be his shield and exceeding great reward. Abraham knew something about Jehovah; part of Abraham's pilgrimage has been 'getting to know' just who Jehovah is. For Abraham, each revelation and subsequent obedience has been part of the process of becoming 'Abraham, My Friend'. One of the foundations of such 'friendship' is the process of self-revelation. Abraham is increasing in the 'knowledge of who God is'. At this point in

his pilgrimage other attributes of the nature of Jehovah are to be revealed to him; the Jehovah who speaks now describes Himself as 'God Almighty'. El Shaddai. Whenever God reveals Himself He does so in a manner which is significant to the individual or the event; Christ's self-revelatory introduction to each of the churches of the Revelation illustrates this point.

El Shaddai; this is the first time we hear that title although it will become the title by which the patriarchs will know Him. [Exodus 6:3] I don't know that we have ever quoted the Geneva Bible in these meditations but here is a good time to start... When Abram was ninety yeere olde and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said vnto him, I am God all sufficient. walke before me, and be thou vpright, (Genesis 17:1 GB) El Shaddai, God – All Sufficient. The word 'almighty' gives the feel of physical strength, and this would fit the Hebrew which has the sense of muscular shoulders about it. The translation 'all sufficient' includes this sense but adds the idea of strength used for our benefit rather than against us. This is not a macho-God, but an all-we-need God. Adam Clarke says that the word Shaddai is derived from the Hebrew word 'shadah' meaning 'to shed, or pour out'. In fact, it is almost certainly derived from the Hebrew word 'shad' meaning a woman's breast. This is God – All Sufficient. The Hebrew word is in its masculine form but its origin is the picture of the all-sufficient care of a mother.

I am told that the natural focus of a baby's eye is the distance between the mother's breast and her face; a baby can't feed from its mother without looking up into her face. Of course, it just the right distance to begin to hear the mother's voice too, and to learn to recognise its moods and accents. And it just so happens that it's the safest place for the baby; wrapped in its mother's protecting arms. Of course, it also happens to be the position in which the baby can receive absolutely all its needs. So from this unique position the baby discovers fellowship, protection, instruction, and provision for every possible need. It seems to me that this is just too many coincidences; I think God is trying to tell us something!

I would like to share a story of true mother-love. Many years ago a Turkish man became a Christian; he came from a simple family with a simple pattern of village life. He married an English Christian who was a close friend of mine. Later he became very ill and Christians from the west arranged for various tests which confirmed that his kidneys were badly diseased; the only hope was a kidney transplant. After more tests it transpired that only his mother had the right match and she was asked if she would be willing to give her kidney for her son. It was explained that without a kidney her son would die. She never hesitated and the operation went well; the son lived. Some time later an amazing subtext to this story emerged. The simple village mother had not known that healthy people have two kidneys; she thought everyone had just one. She wasn't even a Christian... just a mother!

Let me pursue this wonderfully tender picture into the New Testament. Paul is often libelled as masochistic and misogynist, but on two occasions he pictures himself as a woman. The first picture is of child-bearing; My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you, (Galatians 4:19 KJV). Do you see that 'again... until...'. How many times are you willing to go through this Paul? "As often as it takes, until..." The second picture is that of providing for their daily needs; even though as apostles of Christ we might have made such demands. Instead, we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother tenderly caring for her own children. (1 Thessalonians 2:7 ISV) The picture behind the 'nursing mother' is of a mother suckling her own

flesh and blood baby. There are many lessons to learn here. Chief among them may be that only what has passed through our own souls can ever provide 'food' for the next generation.

To return to Genesis 17... God presents Himself to Abraham in the language of the faithful provider of all he could ever need. This is an important point. Only those who have had such a vision could ever receive such a commission. The culmination of God's word to Abraham will be 'be thou perfect'. The Brown-Driver-Briggs' Hebrew Dictionary defines this word 'perfect' as follows;

1) complete, whole, entire, sound

1a) complete, whole, entire

1b) whole, sound, healthful

1c) complete, entire (of time)

1d) sound, wholesome, unimpaired, innocent, having integrity

1e) what is complete or entirely in accord with truth and fact (neuter adjective/substantive)

To this breathtaking concept of Abrahamic Perfection we need to add the observation that the verb here is 'be' not 'do'. God is not requiring of Abraham a single perfect act but a life which is 'perfect'. "Impossible", you cry. Well, yes, it would be if that had been the start of the commission, but it isn't. and be thou perfect is the consequence of something else; it is the effect not the cause. In my old KJV the last clause reads; and be (or become) thou perfect.. 'And' implies that something came before what follows. My point is that in this context God did not simple say 'become perfect'; He said 'do something' and 'become perfect'. Do what?

walk before me This is the most common Hebrew word for 'walk' being used over 1500 times in the Old Testament. How would you define walking? Well it's not complicated, just put one foot in front of the other. Now do it again with the other foot. Now if we say 'walk' we seldom get the cry 'it's impossible'; we know we are being asked to make a start and an uncomplicated start at that. We can be overcomplicated with simple Bible concepts. Here's an even easier explanation of the word 'walk'. "Take a single step. Good, Now take another one". Why should we cry 'impossible'? Even a babe can learn to walk; even a babe still dependent upon its mother's milk can do this. (in simpler cultures weaning took place much later than in our western ones, usually around 2 or even 3 years.)

But what step should I take? The Hebrew preposition 'before' is really the Hebrew word for 'face'. It is often translated 'before' or 'in the presence of'. It is a Hebrew idiom. In this picture it is someone in eye-contact with the person who is directing their steps. I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will counsel thee with mine eye upon thee. (Psalms 32:8 ASV) Notice, those 'thou's again. You won't remember, but this is the way your mother taught you to walk. She got your attention, fixed her eye on you, opened her arms and said 'Come', and you walked. If you had stopped to work it all out, you would have cried 'impossible, I don't do walking'. Did you never read that you must come 'as a child'? This is why children make such astonishing progress; they don't know they can't so they do. I remember teaching my children to jump into the swimming pool. "I can't" they cry. "Come on", says Dad, "I'll catch you". "I can't" says the child,

“Come on” says Dad “I’ll catch you”. He jumps, he’s caught, “I did it” cries the child. He has done what he couldn’t do because he believed his father. Simple isn’t it?

Abraham is to be accountable to God alone; walk before me. He carries no law written in stone, but He is required to hear God’s voice and obey it. The Law cannot get a grip on him; he is outside the Law’s power and demands. His way to Abrahamic Perfection is simple and unique. There is no familiar path made clear by habitual walking. There is no list of does and don’ts; just an insistence upon personal communion, step by step obedience, and a moment by moment dependence on God – All Sufficient.

This whole, impossible, life style can only be sustained as we live in the power of the revelation. It begin, as always, with God’s initiative; the revelation of who He is. He is Jehovah-Jesus whom you have known and who has already opened your eyes to wonderful things. But He reveals Himself now to thee in a new way as God – All Sufficient. You have never seen Him before like this, but you know He is all you could ever need. He commissions you to walk in His presence, with your eyes in mutual contact; in fellowship with Him. He commands it; His commands are His en-ablings. It’s impossible? To whom?

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 KJV)

## Chapter 35

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### A Covenant with Abraham

I have opted for the title above very consciously. We often speak of the Abrahamic Covenant but this covenant was very narrow in its inception. Jehovah appeared to Abram, and said unto him... I will make my covenant between me and thee. (Gen17:1 KJV) This is not a general covenant into any may choose to add themselves; it is a 'me and thee' covenant. I am back to my preoccupation with pronouns! The terms of the covenant, however, are very precise; not 'me and you' plural, but 'me and thee' singular. It was my covenant between me and thee. It had a future perspective in that it included a promise to 'multiply thee exceedingly' but the whole focus is a private covenant.

Abraham's response is to fall upon his face: [Genesis 17:3] and God talked with him. In the following verses it will be well to remember the relative physical positions of 'me and thee'. We are not told whether the God who appeared to Abraham at this point was standing or sitting, but we are told most carefully the position of Abraham; he is on his face. Neither is this a conversation as previous appearances of God to Abraham have been; there is not single word spoken by Abraham. It is not conducive to conversation to have one of the partners face down on the ground. Take a moment to picture the scene.

We have seen Abraham giving himself to God in the symbol of burnt offering. We have seen him build his altars and set his face to do the will of God. But here Abraham is speechless in worship. Here God talked with Abraham, but Abraham did not respond with words but by falling upon his face in abject surrender and worship. The main Hebrew word for 'worship' means just this; to prostrate oneself before another. The word is first used of Abraham's greeting of the strangers who arrived at his tent door in Genesis 18:2 but it was at the 'cutting' of this covenant that this first record of 'worship' is found.

It is all the more remarkable because it came after a silence of thirteen years. The 'something must be done' philosophy of Sarah and Abraham's passive consent had resulted in Ishmael. Ishmael was the product of uncircumcised flesh; naked human energy untouched by the knife. This is power without the cross; carnality. At first sight it is a much more effective solution than waiting God's way and time, but the lasting consequences are devastating and though God may even be prepared to 'bless it' He will never 'own it'; His covenant can never be with an Ishmael.

God's behaviour towards Abraham at this point in time is that of an absolute ruler and Abraham's response is that of His conquest. Here is a biblical illustration of ancient practice; Then the people of the land took Jehoahaz the son of Josiah, and made him king in his father's stead in Jerusalem. Joahaz was twenty and three years old when he began to reign; and he reigned three months in Jerusalem. And the king of Egypt deposed him at Jerusalem, and fined the land a hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold. And the king of Egypt made Eliakim his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem, and changed his name to Jehoiakim. And Neco took Joahaz his brother, and carried him to Egypt. (2 Chronicles 36:1-4 ASV) It tells the story of the disintegration into chaos of the

kingdom of Judah following the premature death of Josiah. Josiah died because he didn't believe that God would speak to him through the mouth of an enemy; let him who hath ears to hear... [2 Chro 36:22] He died at the hands of Pharaoh Necho and the people crowned his son as king. The unnecessary battle with which Josiah had involved himself resulted in Judah coming under the control of Egypt and Necho demonstrated his absolute power by imprisoning the legitimate king; installing that king's brother as puppet-ruler and sealed his total domination of the moment by changing Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim.

A name is a very personal possession. It is not accidental that one method of controlling people is to give them numbers instead of names. The Tibetans believe that to know someone's name enables you to control that person. They are given a secret name, known not even to themselves, and at death their ceremonies use the secret name so that no daemonic powers can steal the soul at the last moment. It is an interesting, although hopelessly twisted, insight. To change a person's name is to demonstrate absolute ownership. Within a very short time Egypt's power waned and Babylon became Judah's puppet-master. Ultimately Judah was taken captive to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar who stamped his authority upon his new subjects; Now among these were, of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. And the prince of the eunuchs gave names unto them: unto Daniel he gave the name of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abed-nego. (Daniel 1:6-7 ASV) I sometimes think this is why we love to define things; we think it gives us control over them.

While on his face, in total submission to his liege lord, Abram receives the name by which we have known him through these devotional meditations; Abraham. Names, particularly those used by God of Himself or of others, have great significance. God's names are revelations of His character, never simple labels. When He gives new names to people it is always highly significant and marks a new starting point for that person; Abraham, Israel, Jeshurun, Peter. His name is changed from High Father to Father of a Multitude. After thirteen years of silence and Abraham's fond watching of Ishmael it must have come as something of shock. Abraham had been contentedly watching young Ishmael, thinking him to be the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promise 'I will make of thee a great nation' [Gen12:2]. Suddenly God breaks into his peaceful presumptions, and completely ignores the object of Abraham's current affections. It is as though Ishmael had never happened. This is probably what provoked Abraham's cry; And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee! (Genesis 17:18 KJV) It is Abraham's only request in the whole event.

There is something of a pattern in God's dealings with Abraham which may help us to see things from God's perspective. It had begun with a promise twenty five years earlier in Genesis 12; And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: (Genesis 12:2 KJV). I wonder how often Abraham turned this promise over in his mind? It came without explanation of how it would ever be accomplished. There is an old English harvest hymn which begins...

The sower went forth sowing,

The seed in secret slept

Through weeks of faith and patience,

Till out the green blade crept;

Sometimes God plants a seed promise into our heart long before it germinates. It is always folly to try to hurry God's processes. God had many things to accomplish in the life of Abraham before His time would come. God would have to strip away many invisible things on which Abraham's life was built. The secret is not to measure the progress but to obey the voice; For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. (Habakkuk 2:3 KJV) If God has spoken, keep your heart in peace, it will surely come, it will not tarry.

Then, in our pattern, we move forwards many years and God appears to Abraham. How often, in these devotionals, have we said it must all begin with God's self-revelation? Jehovah appeared to Abram. [Genesis 17:1] His time has come. He will breathe something fresh into Abraham. Did you notice that in the change of name for both Sarai and Abram God simply adds a letter? It is the Hebrew letter 'He' (ה, or "h"). It is the aspirate. Did you know that God can change the nature of something simply by breathing into it? Of course you did; And Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (Genesis 2:7 ASV) We must be sure to distinguish between the promise and the breath; the first guarantees the second, but the first remains but a promise until the second is accomplished.

This is a familiar OT theme. Ezekiel saw a valley of bleached corpses and was commanded to 'prophesy' to them. What was his prophesy? It was a promise; And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord Jehovah, thou knowest. Again he said unto me, Prophesy over these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of Jehovah. Thus saith the Lord Jehovah unto these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live. (Ezekiel 37:3-5 ASV) The prophecy seems to have had its own effect; So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and, behold, an earthquake; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. (Ezekiel 37:7 ASV) There is often a lot of noise and an earthquake or two between the promise and its fulfilment; be sure not to confuse the one with the other. But the reality is unmistakable; Then said he unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord Jehovah: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army. (Ezekiel 37:9-10 ASV) Ah, it was not the promise but the breath that made the difference between death and life.

As a result of God's exhalation something happened to Abraham. And here we see a thrilling glimpse of God's perspectives in time; As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be the father of a multitude of nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be the father of a multitude of nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made thee. (Genesis 17:4-5 ASV)

. (Genesis 17:4-5 ASV) Notice the order of the tenses; thou shalt be the father of a multitude of nations. That's the future tense. but thy name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made thee. (Genesis 17:4-5 ASV) That's the past tense. Let me run the ideas together; thou shalt be what I have made thee. This is why we get so many frustrations in Christian

experience; we exhaust ourselves trying to be what God has not made us. But when God breathes into us life begins and things impossible to Abram become gloriously possible to Abraham. Romans 4 speaks of Abraham's body being dead and the deadness of Sarah's womb. In fact it was Abram and Sarai who were 'dead' until that Divine asperate. It is the breath that makes the difference. Abraham became what he had been made;

## Chapter 36

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### Why circumcision?

I promised I would return to the account of the birth of Ishmael but I have been somewhat reluctant to start on this devotional, simply because of the propriety of the topic. In many ways the Bible is a very primitive book and issues which would not usually be discussed in mixed company are to be found within its pages. The Song of Solomon, for example, was traditionally forbidden to boys under a certain age, but circumcision is such a foundational issue in both testaments that we must seek a way to address the Bible's teaching on the issue.

This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. (Genesis 17:10 KJV)

In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: (Colossians 2:11 KJV)

I am going to leave out many things I see in this practice and trust our readers to 'read between the lines' with a heart open before God. If aspects of what I say trouble you, please leave the devotional and perhaps come back to it at a later time. According to God's word to Abraham circumcision was... a token of a covenant betwixt me and you. (Genesis 17:11 ASV) That 'you' may be significant; it is in strong contrast to the many 'thees' of the earlier part of the chapter. This is a family token for a family covenant; This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised. (Genesis 17:10 ASV) It is surprising how little is said about circumcision during the giving of the law. There are just two references and both presume the fact of circumcision rather than command it. [Ex 12:44,48. Leviticus 12:3] In the second giving of the law, Deuteronomy, the references are only ever to 'circumcision of the heart' [Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6.] In that sense the Law was given to a people who 'were already circumcised'. Circumcision is not a sign of the Sinai Covenant but of the Abrahamic Covenant; Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers;) and ye on the sabbath day circumcise a man. (John 7:22 KJV) Circumcision is much older than Israel.

Why did God institute, what to many is, a barbaric ritual? There is a interesting reaction to circumcision in the story of Moses and Zipporah. When Zipporah realised the necessity of this practice her reaction is one of disgust; Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. (Exodus 4:25 KJV) Zipporah's feelings would be shared by many today. Why circumcision? There are many areas in which the symbolism is very instructive and I will share what has come to my own heart as I have meditated for decades on this issue...

Abraham lived approximately 1800 to 2000 years before Christ. Archaeologists know this period of time well. Among the many religions of the day there is one overwhelming evidence of a religion which, and is, world-wide. It is sometime known as 'fertility religion'; it was the worship of power.

(beware the worship of power!) Paul tracks the degeneration of the human race as it refused God's truth; Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, (Romans 1:21-22 KJV) Paul links rejection of God with idolatry, and with idolatry he links sexual obsession which developed into sexual perversion; Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: (Romans 1:24 KJV).

A humanity which had rejected divine revelation saw still power all around. They saw the power of wind and sun and water, but above all these they saw the power of the seasons. The year sank into winter's death and was revived with the coming of spring. They saw the power of reproduction accomplishing the same results, and they came to believe that these powers were connected. They came to believe that human sexual activity could assist the process of the seasons, and that the gods required human participation in such activity to aid them in their 'divine' struggle against winter and death. The universal religion of the world has been the worship and participation in reproductive power, and they worshipped a symbol of this power. The evidence is worldwide in 'standing stones' which are to be seen on every continent of the world. In every place, on every high hill, these grotesque symbols declare man's worship of the most elemental power of all, the power to reproduce. In the land of Canaan the God who represented the concentrated energy of reproductive power was known as Baal and the 'standing stones' littered the land and polluted it to such a degree that ultimately God empowered the land to cleanse itself of its pollution; And the land is defiled: therefore I do visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land itself vomiteth out her inhabitants. (Leviticus 18:25 KJV)

In many ways this is the ultimate folly of the human race, to think that we are necessary to God, and to think that our human powers are necessary to the accomplishing of God's purposes. In spite of all that Abraham had learned in his walk he still succumbed to this thinking in the fathering of Ishmael. His human energies would be focused to bring the will of God into being. In seventeenth chapter of Genesis we find Abraham pleading with God to 'bless' the result of this blasphemy, and the amazing thing is that God does bless it and makes it fruitful. This is sobering Bible truth; He blesses it but He cannot own it. And Abraham said unto God, Oh that Ishmael might live before thee! And God said, Nay, but Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year. (Genesis 17:18-21 ASV) Ishmaels can never become Isaacs, no matter how much prayer or attention we may labour on them; That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:6 KJV)

The natural power of man will have to come under symbolic execution before the work of God can be accomplished, and forever after God's people must bear the scars of the execution as a constant reminder that God's work must can only ever be accomplished in God's way; Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, This is the word of Jehovah unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith Jehovah of hosts. (Zechariah 4:6 ASV) Centuries later Paul expounded the symbolism of circumcision in writing to the Philippians; For we are the

circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: (Philippians 3:3-4 KJV).

It is worth pausing a little while to consider the elements of truth that Paul highlights here; for we are the circumcision, who by the Spirit are serving God, and glorying in Christ Jesus, and in flesh having no trust, (Philippians 3:3 YLT). Mere external circumcision, says Paul, is mutilation. Then he describes the truth of which circumcision was the symbol. The true circumcision 'serve God in the Spirit'. The word 'serve' here is to serve as priests, λατρευω (latreuo). The true 'circumcision' are the genuine servants of God. They do not serve their own agendas with their own energies, but they belong to another and his landmark is upon their bodies. Secondly, the true 'circumcision' only boast in Jesus Christ. The boast is not in their own abilities or prowess but in His, and finally... and this could be taken as bible definition of the word 'circumcision'... they have no confidence in the flesh. That is what circumcision was originally, a vote of no-confidence in the flesh. Abraham's covenant and God's purposes would be symbolised by a man on his face, crippled in his elemental strength, not by the arrogant energy of 'standing stones'. The natural man must be reduced to impotency to make room for God's power.

The truth is eloquently illustrated again in God's sending of Moses to Egypt and the strange happenings in the inn. [Ex 4:18-26] We know that Moses had two sons (Gershom and Eliezer), and yet Zipporah only circumcised a single son according to the narrative. What is happening here? The most likely scenario is that of the males in this group two were already circumcised; Moses and Gershom. However for some reason, and we will return to this in the next devotional, the younger son Eliezer was uncircumcised. Moses had previously tried to liberate the Israelites by use of his own strength and failed; For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not. (Acts 7:25 KJV) This time however it was by direct command of God and was to be plain for all to see that it was not by might, nor by power, but by God's own outstretched arm; Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: (Exodus 6:6 KJV) It is impossible to calculate the age of Eliezer but his presence in the party represented man's un-crippled energy and that could not be tolerated. God moved against Moses and it was only the reluctant but prompt action of Zipporah which saved him.

Let's take one more illustration. When Joshua and his armies crossed the dry bed of the Jordan into the Promised Land they were poised to conquer everything before them. However, the conquest of the Promised Land would not be attributable to the strength or cunning of Joshua and his armies. It was to be God's power and God's conquest, consequently there was a mass circumcision at Gilgal. The whole of the new generation born in the wilderness were without this mark of 'no confidence in the flesh'. [Joshua 5:2-10] This is a unique way of conquest; cripple your army for a few days. There is a fascinating postscript to this event in the Septuagint version of the burial of Joshua; And they buried him by the borders of his inheritance in Thamnasarach in the mount of Ephraim, northward of the mount of Galaad: there they put with him into the tomb in which they buried him, the knives of stone with which he circumcised the children of Israel in Galgala, when he brought them out of Egypt, as the Lord appointed them; and there they are to this day. (Joshua 24:30 LXX) It is not in the original Masoretic text but it stands as a testimony to

the perceived importance of Joshua's action in Gilgal; he was buried with the tools of the nation's circumcision. It could only be a people with 'no confidence in the flesh' who would triumph in Canaan.

Gilgal become Israel's base in the conquest of the Promised Land. Frequently we find them 'back at Gilgal'; [Joshua 9:6, 10:6, 10:15, 10:43] There is a lesson here that we will need to learn. God will constantly lead us back to Gilgal; the place of crippled human energy. Particularly when we have known His power in victory we shall need to return to Gilgal. In truth, in all our outward movement for God we must learn to abide in the place of impotence. It is part of God's unchanging conditions; no flesh shall glory in His presence. [1 Cor 1:29]

## Chapter 37

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### Beware the Midianites

In our last devotional we began to explore some of the implications of the ritual of circumcision and the continuing truths that are implied in the typology. Let's recap briefly. Circumcision is a picture of 'no confidence in the flesh'. It is the picture of 'denying' oneself and of taking up our cross daily. It is a personal sentence of death on the driving energy of the natural man.

Later in our studies of 'the making of a praying man' we will examine the account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. We will just touch here on the beginning of the story; And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah. And offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. (Genesis 22:2 ASV) And yet we know that Isaac was not Abraham's only son and when Abraham died we read that Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah (Genesis 25:9 ASV) So why does God not recognise Ishmael as Abraham's son in Gen 17? It all stems from Ishmael's beginnings. His mother was Hagar the Egyptian servant girl, and his father was an uncircumcised Abram. As we commented in our last devotional, this was human power untouched by the knife; it can never be allowed to accomplish the purposes of God.

In fact, Ishmael was not the only 'other' son of Abraham. Following Sarah's death Abraham took another wife who bore him a fresh family of 6 sons; And Abraham took another wife, and her name was Keturah. And she bare him Zimran, and Jokshan, and Medan, and Midian, and Ishbak, and Shuah. (Genesis 25:1,2 ASV) From this fresh start we will trace the Biblical career of Abraham's 6th son, Midian. Although God renewed Abraham's natural powers of reproduction to enable the fathering of Isaac, it seems that Abraham retained these powers and appetites. After the death of Sarah, Abraham used this natural power and right in the taking of Keturah and his relationship with her produced this extra family of his old age. What can this signify?

Circumcision heals quickly. The scars remain but the temporary impotency is easily forgotten. Abraham was bearing 'in his body' the reminder that he 'was not his own' but 'another's'. What God had given to Abraham was not his to use for his own will or purpose but exclusively for the will of God. In ignoring this Abraham behaved as though he were un-circumcised. Without the inward work of heart-circumcision the outward is just a mutilation; For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: (Romans 2:28 KJV). And, in case 'mutilation' should seem too harsh a word, let me add that this is Paul's description not mine; Beware of the dogs! Beware of the evil workers! Beware of the mutilators! For it is we who are the circumcision-we who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus. We have not placed any confidence in the flesh, (Philippians 3:2-3 ISV)

There is a so-called 'Irish definition' of sanctification which describes it an event that occurs 'once for all, daily'. ( It is time the Irish got credit for something; that is a great definition. ) Circumcision was 'once for all' but the truth of which it spoke was to be outworked daily in the lives of the

circumcised; not my will, but thine, be done. (Luke 22:42 KJV)

How are we to use the powers and hungers that God has put into our lives? There a wonderful example in the temptation narratives. Christ was hungry; that is a natural appetite, it is no sin to be hungry. In fact, if someone has not eaten for 40 days and is not hungry, he is sick; his body is closing down. God gave us hunger as part of our survival kit; it's no accident that a 'good appetite' is regarded as a sign of health. Things are working normally when someone who has not eaten is hungry. In the temptation narrative, Satan used this natural hunger as the basis for a trial. Surely, if hunger is a God given gift and you have the power to do something about it, why not satisfy your hunger? Here then is the test; will you sacrifice your rightful hunger for the sake of the will of God, or will you sacrifice the will of God for the satisfaction of your natural hunger? Human hungers, of course, came under the rule of a rebellious spirit. Christ had no rebellious spirit but the simple principles still have their outworking; Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. (Hebrews 10:7 KJV) Paul puts his finger right on the spot when speaking of Christ's life he says; ...Christ pleased not himself; (Romans 15:3 KJV) We could follow this through at many levels but lets learn a thing or two from the consequences of a life lived for its own benefit without regard to the will of God; in our picture, un-circumcision.

There is no record that any of the sons of Keturah were ever circumcised. They were never included in the covenant and never submitted to the sign of the covenant. Midian is a man with life originally derived from God, but who lives his life for his own benefit; in contrast to Christ, Midian did 'please himself'. Midian means 'strife' and the 'uncircumcised' will always bring strife into the purposes of God.

The next main event in the life of the Midianites is the fact that Moses sought safety in their territory as he fled from Egypt; Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian: and he sat down by a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters: and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. (Exodus 2:15-16 KJV) We discover that Midian has set up his own priestly system. We always need to remember that human nature is instinctively religious and this is often a curse rather than a blessing. This priest of Midian is known as Jethro, meaning 'His excellency' and Reuel, meaning 'the friend of God'. We don't know who called Jethro 'the friend of God' except that it was not God Himself who reserved this description for Abraham. Reading between the lines it seems that Jethro-Reuel (His Excellency, the Friend of God) had a very mixed theology. When God delivered the Israelites from Egypt his comment is recorded; Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods: for in the thing wherein they dealt proudly he was above them. And Jethro, Moses' father in law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God: and Aaron came, and all the elders of Israel, to eat bread with Moses' father in law before God. (Exodus 18:11-12 KJV). 'Now I know...' He was impressed with God's power and it modified his theology, but there are important ingredients which are missing from Midian; there is no covenant with God and no circumcision. Later the Bible records the story of another man who used God's power for his own ends. It is interesting to see the company he keeps as the story opens; And Moab said unto the elders of Midian, Now shall this company lick up all that are round about us, as the ox licketh up the grass of the field. And Balak the son of Zippor was king of the Moabites at that time. He sent messengers therefore unto Balaam the son of Beor to Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of his people, to call him, saying, Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt:

behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me: (Numbers 22:4-5 KJV) Balaam the mercenary prophet was on hire to the Moabites and the Midianites. Can you begin to see the pattern of how Midian is prepared to use spiritual power for his own ends?

Moses' wife was a Midianite; her name was Zipporah. He passed into her family and under the shadow of his father-in-law, Jethro-Reuel. Let me suggest a scenario which may explain the strange events that occurred in the inn when Moses was en-route for Egypt. Moses had been circumcised as an 8-day infant. He marries into a family which is religious and has lots of theological information but which has no covenant with God and no pattern of circumcision. Their first child is called Gershom. Can you imagine the scene with this baby boy? "It's time for him to be circumcised," says Moses. "Barbaric ritual," says Zipporah. But these are early days and Moses' will is honoured; Gershom is circumcised. Later another child is born. Memories of his people and his life in Egypt are dimming now; Moses is becoming Midianite. When Eliezer was born the scene is re-enacted. "It's time for him to be circumcised," says Moses. "Barbaric ritual," says Zipporah. "Oh, alright dear," says Moses, "just as you like..." I base this scenario on Exodus 4 which tells us that Moses took his wife and 'sons' with him towards Egypt, but that when God attacked him, it was only necessary for Zipporah to circumcise her 'son'. Her reaction is typically Midianite; Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. (Exodus 4:25 KJV)

God will not have 'loose-cannon' human energy on his payroll. Israel was to be delivered by God's strong arm, not man's. Moses almost lost his life and his mission through this compromise. God's will must be done in God's way. When the time came for Israel to leave Egypt, the Passover meal and consequent freedom from Egypt's power was only available for the circumcised; But every man's servant that is bought for money, when thou hast circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof. (Exodus 12:44 KJV) And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof. (Exodus 12:48 KJV)

When they left Egypt Jethro-Reuel makes another appearance. "What you need" he explained to Moses, "is some organisation and structure." He may have been the world's first management consultant! His solution is a hierarchy of authority. [Ex 18:19-26] Moses 'implemented the recommendations' but there is no word from God to confirm the advice or the action. It is sobering to see how God handled this problem in His own way and time; And the LORD said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee. And I will come down and talk with thee there: and I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone. (Numbers 11:16-17 KJV) Midian is never short of ideas and methodology but God's pattern is very different. God's pattern is based not on hierarchy and specialist knowledge but on men who have waited in the presence of God and received His enabling Spirit.

Just time for one more glimpse at the Biblical tracing of Midian's career... And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD: and the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian

seven years. And the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel: and because of the Midianites the children of Israel made them the dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strong holds. And so it was, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against them; And they encamped against them, and destroyed the increase of the earth, till thou come unto Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. (Judges 6:1-4 KJV) This is the final revelation of Midian; he began through unbridled energy and lived his life without covenant or circumcision. In Jethro's family he is seen as religious and a willing fellow-traveller in God's way, but he secretly resents and despises the faith that demands the bearing of a cross. Then we see his hostility coming even more clearly into focus as he hires Balaam to curse the people of God, and now we shall see him in open confrontation, robbing Israel of God's full harvest.

What a picture it is of lives brought to poverty by 'uncircumcision'; when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against them; And they encamped against them, and destroyed the increase of the earth, till thou come unto Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. Just imagine the time and effort that has gone into 'sowing' and reaping and winnowing and all the animal husbandry and then comes Midian... and left no sustenance for Israel. The work of years... lost because of Midian. Beware the Midianites!!

Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. (Revelation 3:11 KJV)

## Chapter 38

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a long history of a moment

(with apologies to Stephen Hawking)

Let's begin by reminding ourselves of the place that this personal covenant between God and Abraham has in the overall revelation of God's purposes. This is something we need to do often with the scriptures. Events are often being worked out at different levels at the same time. These personal events in the life of Abraham have their impact, worldwide and throughout time. To Abraham they were intensely personal but on the larger stage momentous moves are taking place; things that angels desire to look into.

The connection between time and eternity is a concept that dwellers in time can never fully grasp. The struggles of different schools of eschatology all begin here. How do we synchronize temporal and eternal 'timescales'? Abraham witnessed an 'eternal reality' at a point in time and space Genesis 15: And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold, a smoking furnace, and a flaming torch that passed between these pieces. (Genesis 15:17 ASV). Abraham could have put this event in his diary under a specific date. It was a time-space event for him, but it was, at the same time, an eternal reality. On earth events must be sequential, with one event following another. In the eternal reality 'events' just are!

Let's take another dateable event; let's take Psalm 2. Yet I have set my king Upon my holy hill of Zion. I will tell of the decree: Jehovah said unto me, Thou art my son; This day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, And the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. (Psalms 2:6-9 ASV). "this day" is a time reference; theoretically, in the world's diary it would be under the events of a certain day. The Psalm soars far beyond David's personal experience and is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a manifestation of the kind that Peter refers to; Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus. (Acts 1:16 KJV). (This, by the way, is a wonderful definition of 'inspiration';" the Holy Spirit spake by the mouth of..." David, Isaiah, Daniel...Luke, Paul, James... ) In Psalm 2 the 'Holy Spirit spake by the mouth of David' and the 'event' that he witnessed took place on several 'planes' at the same time. It has reference to David's own life and experience, but its diary date is really "Acts 2 minus 10" or if we dare call the Day of Pentecost 'P' Day, Psalm 2 really occurred at "P Day minus 10). This is when He was Taken up in glory (1 Tim 3:16 NASB). It is His ascension and accession; his exaltation and coronation.

Let's take just one more diary event. Psalm 22 is one of the most amazing pieces of scripture in the Book. Our Bibles usually credit David with the composition and call it 'a Psalm of David'. But this is another thrilling example of the 'Holy Spirit speaking by the mouth of David'. This may be David's psalm but it is certainly not David's testimony; they pierced my hands and my feet was not

David's experience. They divide my garments among them, And for my clothing they cast lots. is not David's testimony either. David, in the Spirit, is hearing a pre-echo; it is coming from 'P Day minus 50'. At a place in time and space this was the unspoken testimony of Christ; the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. Christ was not quoting David; David was quoting Christ. Is your brain beginning to spin? Even on the plane of a world timeline the Bible is an extraordinary book, but there is another plane altogether, the eternal.

An 'eternal event' is an oxymoron; a self-contradictory statement. And yet there are 'events' that have impacted upon eternity. Let's see if we can spin our brains a little more? But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. (2 Peter 3:8 KJV). Now when Christians quote this verse they are usually thinking about the last statement that a 'thousand years is as one day', and the prevailing thought is that of God's patient enduring. But the first half of the statement is true too; one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and at the same time! So these are not two alternate and switchable views available to God. In God's realm ('with the Lord' is literally 'by His side') at one and the same time is 'as' a long line and a pin-point. In fact, it is our time-locked understanding that concluded that these two apparent alternatives are 'viewpoints' at all. The fact is that 'with the Lord' time is not affecting the viewpoint, for the one watching time is outside it.

The artist is able to freeze a moment in time and give us time to examine it in detail. The sculptor or the painter captures a moment 'for ever'. It is a great skill and a wonderful blessing or curse. Have you felt the pain in Edvard Munch's 'The Scream'? It is still there, and you can still touch it. Have you wandered into a Constable Landscape and walked up over the hill through the waving corn? The same kind of thing is possible to a degree with the slow-motion-replay. Imagine then a day (or a year) played back over a period of a thousand years and think of what you would see that you hadn't seen the first time. And yet Peter is not referring to a replay, but the actual event; and it is not happening in slow-motion but real time. 'with the Lord' events happen at different speeds at the same time and sometimes become part of an 'eternal event'. How can anything 'become' part of eternity? Well, because God is 'in time' and 'outside time'... at the same time!

In the book of the Revelation, John saw a sequence of visions. In Chapter 4 he hears the song that the angels sang at creation and sees a solitary figure upon the throne. It is an eternal record of creation, not in Genesis detail, but in overall truth. It sees the whole earthly and heavenly creation joined the theme of a great song. "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created." (Revelation 4:11 NASB) In Chapter 5 John discovers great sorrow; the angel voices are silent and only the sound of his weeping is heard. He weeps because although God is worthy, no man is. It seems as though creation's destiny can never be unfolded; there are things that God will only do 'through man'; not even the Cherubim can take his place, and all mankind is disqualified. In his weeping he is told to view the Lion of the Tribe of Judah who has 'overcome' to open the book and loose the seven seals. He looks for a lion but sees a lamb, and the lamb is now 'in the midst of the throne'; the lamb now shares the eternal throne. It is as Jesus had revealed; To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. (Revelation 3:21 KJV)

The eternal, unchanging, throne of God has now 'become' the Throne of God and of the Lamb; an 'eternal event' has occurred. The book of the Revelation was written towards the end of the 1st century; the 'eternal event' that it records 'took place' 70 years earlier at 'P Day minus 10'. And yet the moment has not aged; John sees a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain ... (NASB). The NASB shows the order better here. This is a graphic image; the word for 'slain' is 'slaughtered/butchered' – it denotes a violent death. And yet the Lamb is standing. In fact this Lamb is a standing, slaughtered, sitting Lamb; all at the same 'time'. He is the Risen Lord, the Suffering Lamb and the Reigning King; all at the same time. Events in time have impacted upon eternity and the 'eternal event' is captured by this artist in the Spirit. Please note that I put all those descriptive verbs into the 'present' tense. In time, these events had a sequence; in eternity they are simultaneous; all as fresh as the 'time' when they occurred. Little wonder that the Cherubim switched to a 'new song'.

When we try to synchronize (make times meet) earthly events and 'eternal events' we need to be cautious in forcing the match. There is a strong temptation to inexperienced jig-saw puzzlers to 'make it fit'. You may 'make it fit' but you may completely change the picture. This is where eschatology demands humility and caution. On earth we must experience, in time and space, eternal realities. The salvation that Christ accomplished is 'done' in the eternal event, but it must be worked out in our personal experience in time and space. The 'finished work' is finished only in Christ and we must be put 'into Christ' at a point in time for it to become 'eternally true' of us too.

These are awkward concepts for finite minds. How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:14 KJV) The blood of the slaughtered Lamb was shed in 'time and place' but it was 'through the eternal Spirit' that the blood shed in 'time and place' impacted eternal realities. And yet they are not different events but the same event. If the blood had splashed upon us as it did upon his executioners it would have had no 'eternal' significance. Only through that same 'eternal Spirit' can we be joined to the benefits of His death. Only then will His achievements be mine in time and space.

How did we get here from Abraham? God's personal covenant with Abraham was designed to be repeated in successive generations of Abraham's bloodline; And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. (Genesis 17:7 KJV) But God would have to 'establish' or 'raise up' that covenant relationship again, fresh in each generation; and He did. In this sense, God has no grand-children. Each generation would need a fresh revelation of God's nature; God would need to appear again as 'El Shaddai' to Isaac and then to Jacob; and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, as God Almighty (El Shaddai) ; but by my name Jehovah I was not known to them. (Exodus 6:3 ASV)

As for Abraham, so for us all. We cannot live on other men's histories or testimonies. God in His mercy must re-appear in our own time and place to each of us. The 'eternal events' do not need to be repeated but they do need to be constantly re-vealed and then, by the working of that same eternal Spirit, we may enter, if we will, into our own personal experience of 'eternal events'.

## Chapter 39

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the sitting, running, lying, standing man

Some 38 devotionals ago, Greg asked me begin a series of devotionals with the brief of covering some foundation issues. As the website has 'prayer' as a main focus I decided that I could combine both by a meditation on the preparation of Abraham as 'a praying man'. It may appear that at times we have lost sight of the target but it is not so. The target comes into clearer vision in our next chapter of Genesis, but the route has not been random. Prayer is based in relationship. Not academic or ritual relationship but a dynamic link between Creator and creature. The man who does not pray denies his creaturehood; whatever his theology he is a practising atheist. Relationship is a growing thing and we have needed to see how God initiated this relationship and made Abraham the great example of access to God by faith (or justification). We have seen some of his failures, but even these are not wasted in God's shaping of His vessel. We have seen the aberration of human energy focused in achieving the will of God, and we have seen Abraham brought to the place of an abject consciousness of his own weakness, inability and deadness. We have also seen God establishing a covenant with him. This is vital; prayer depends upon permanent relationship, not promise or impression.

Of course we can pray from the first day, but to be shaped into a praying man will take God some time in the individual. As this next chapter dawns, we will begin to make a sharper focus on the making of a praying man.

As Genesis 18 opens we read again that Jehovah appeared unto him... How often we have remarked that it is ever God who takes the initiative. Even though Abraham is now in covenant relation, and bears in his body the private but indelible marks of ownership, God must still take the first step. What a wonderful thing it is that we have a God who has chosen self-disclosure. No human power or desire can enable us to discover God; we know nothing that He has not specifically revealed. Speculative theology is a peculiarly human arrogance. So the time has come for God to take the next step in the shaping of his praying man, and he appears to Abraham as he sits in the tent door in the heat of the day. It's a moment of rest and reflection. The sun is high and hot and Abraham shelters from its presence in the doorway of his tent.

We have watched this tent for some time now. It is the symbol of the pilgrim; By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; (Hebrews 11:9 NASB) It is the symbol of his impermanence and unsatisfied longing; For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. (Hebrews 13:14 KJV) We have watched him building altars but pitching his tent; the first are his permanent records of his devotion to God, the latter has left no record. His pilgrimage left no mark on the human landscape, but every step was known to God. Such are God's praying men; their memorials are not in stone where men may worship or mock them but in eternal consequences which neither man nor time can erase.

I wonder what he was thinking about? Isaac, I suspect. Isaac unborn, unconceived as yet, but already a fixed reality by faith. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1 KJV) The thing long hoped for had become 'substance'. In his heart he had the evidence of things not yet seen. God had named the unborn son And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac...(Genesis 17:19 KJV) and Abraham had believed... him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. (Romans 4:17 KJV) The Romans record the story sums up Abraham's state; ...fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. (Romans 4:21 KJV)

Sitting seems to be the position of expectancy. But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. (Hebrews 10:12-13 KJV); patient expectancy. There is time to stand and fight, and a time to sit and wait in anticipation. We are familiar with the phrase 'tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem' but the Greek is 'kathizo' which means to 'sit down'. Our familiar phrase ought really to have been translated 'sit down in the city of Jerusalem'. It is also the position of work completed. He had nothing more to do He sat down; they had nothing more to do (at this stage) they must sit down too. Shall I be misunderstood if I say real praying must begin with no praying? The early Pentecostals were famous for their 'waiting' or 'tarrying meetings', where much time was spent in agonizing prayer. I wonder how folk would respond if we organized some 'Sitting Meetings'? What must I do to receive the promised Spirit? Just sit down... but don't go to sleep! I watched a video clip of a baptism this week and noted the contribution of the person being baptized. He just seemed to put himself into the hands of the baptizers and then did nothing! Lazy or wise? I have conducted a few hundred water baptisms and I always prepared them with the same words; 'please don't help me'! The only person I ever almost lost was someone who tried to 'help me'!

So, he sits in faith, knowing that God will choose the moment. Abraham's visitors arrived suddenly without warning. And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, (Genesis 18:2 KJV) He doesn't seem to have seen them coming. He lifts up his eyes and there they are, right 'by him'. At this point it seems as though Jehovah appeared to him and lo, three men stood by him. Is this the three-in-one? Abraham addresses the visitors as 'My Lord' and used 'thees and thous' but then switches to 'you and yours'. But we don't need to commit ourselves to one view at this time, the important thing is to note Abraham's response to his guests; he ran to meet them from the tent door. Perhaps it would be in order to remind ourselves that this old man, dozing in the shade, is 100 years old. Just one glimpse of the LORD and he bursts into action. He runs to meet them and throws himself at their feet. What a welcome! Had he known the hymn, I'm sure he would have sang..

Saviour of all, to Thee we bow,

And own Thee faithful to Thy word;

We hear Thy voice, and open now

Our hearts to entertain our Lord.

Come in, come in, Thou heavenly Guest;

Delight in what Thyself hast given,  
On thine own gifts and graces feast,  
And make the contrite heart Thy heaven.

Although we often hear preachers say that the first reference to the worship of God is Gen 22, in fact the first reference is right here; ...and bowed himself toward the ground, (Genesis 18:2 KJV) where the word 'bowed' is the word for worship; to prostrate oneself. He sits, he runs, he worships... I love this old man! No decorum here, no conscious dignity, no elaborate eastern greetings, just utter yieldedness to His divine guest. Do you begin to see why God called this man, 'My Friend, Abraham?' Would you be a praying man? Put away your 'prayer list' and come running to greet your Guest... now worship! Have you noticed this divine order? Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. (Matthew 4:10 KJV) thou shalt worship... thou shalt serve.

When Satan stopped worshipping he fell. The Bible describes him as a cherub and says he was the 'anointed cherub'. The 'anointed priest' was the high priest and Lucifer was the greatest created being. The remaining cherubim continue their attendance upon God; and the four living creatures, having each one of them six wings, are full of eyes round about and within: and they have no rest day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come. (Revelation 4:8 ASV) These are the holiest of the angels but have no eyes for their own holiness but only for His. They appear in scripture as completely God-conscious beings. I don't know how long they have been worshipping like this, but I do know that at a point in time one cherub took his eyes off God and began to admire himself; Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee. Thou hast defiled thy sanctuaries by the multitude of thine iniquities, by the iniquity of thy traffick; therefore will I bring forth a fire from the midst of thee, it shall devour thee, and I will bring thee to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all them that behold thee. (Ezekiel 28:17-18 KJV) In the moment he ceased to worship his doom was sealed. Saved to serve, say the badges. Saved to worship, says the Book. Service will inevitably follow worship, but worship does not inevitably follow service. First the blossom and sweet perfume, then the fruit.

There is a wonderful audacity about genuine faith. Abraham calls him, My Lord and acknowledges himself as thy servant, but Abraham wants Him to become his Guest. He has worshipped now he will work; Abraham hastened into the tent and instructs Sarah to make ready quickly three measures of fine meal then Abraham ran unto the herd and fetched calf tender and good. In turn Abraham's young man hastened to dress it. Busy days follow times of genuine worship. Abraham is willing to spend and be spent; the man who has abandoned himself in worship is not one to measure the expense.

And then after the sitting, running, lying, and working comes the standing; And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat. (Genesis 18:8 KJV) He is the servant here, waiting upon His Lord. He has no agenda and no petitions. There is no sitting now, he stands while his Guest eats; Abraham is simply available to God; Unto thee do I lift up mine eyes, O thou that sittest in the heavens.

Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their master, As the eyes of a maid unto the hand of her mistress; So our eyes look unto Jehovah our God, Until he have mercy upon us. (Psalms 123:1-2 ASV) To such men God will reveal his secrets.

## Chapter 40

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they that wait upon the Lord

And then after the sitting, running, lying, and working comes the standing; And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat. (Genesis 18:8 KJV) He is the servant here, waiting upon His Lord. He has no agenda and no petitions. There is no sitting now, he stands while his Guest eats; Abraham is simply available to God; Unto thee do I lift up mine eyes, O thou that sittest in the heavens. Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their master, As the eyes of a maid unto the hand of her mistress; So our eyes look unto Jehovah our God, Until he have mercy upon us. (Psalms 123:1-2 ASV) To such men God will reveal his secrets. This is such a fundamental in the 'making of a praying man' that we must give more time to the topic.

As we read Genesis 18 slowly we get a definite feeling of the hustle and bustle of Abraham as he prepares for the wellbeing of his guest, and then suddenly it all slows to a complete halt; And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat. (Genesis 18:8 KJV) The previous verbs are very graphic; he ran to meet the guests, he bowed, he hastened to instruct Sarah, he instructs 'make ready quickly', he runs to the herd, he hastened to dress it... such preparations are fitting. But when he sets it all before them, he stood by them under the tree. We live in a day when the techniques of prayer are constantly advocated and in an era peculiarly given to method we are inundated with 'How to...' manuals. An earlier generation was wiser; Samuel Chadwick wrote "A season of silence is the best preparation for speech with God". (The Path of Prayer) The first criterion for prayer is not 'need consciousness' but 'God consciousness'.

This chapter reveals Abraham as he receives the final promise of the seed; the promise will find its fulfilment now. It also reveals Abraham as an intercessor; a man who pours out himself in prayer for others. In both cases we discover that these events are preceded by a season of Abraham 'waiting on the Lord'. (Genesis 18:8,22) Later when the judgements fall we find Abraham watching them from the same spot; And Abraham gat up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the LORD: And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace. (Genesis 19:27-28 KJV) Central to the events of the fulfilled promise and the expression of God's will upon the earth, we find Abraham 'waiting upon the LORD'. Before we examine the promise and the judgement lets pursue the topic of 'waiting upon God'.

The first thought is of silent attentiveness to the person of God Himself. We are so anxious to get on with the job that we forget the qualifications for the job; And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach, (Mark 3:14 KJV) The order here is not accidental. A man may have great power in his oratory, but if he has not received his message, he has nothing to say. If he has not come from the presence of the Lord how can he be described as 'sent'? For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with

eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. (1 Corinthians 1:17RSV) Was there ever a more sobering verse for preachers?

Later in Israel's history God ordained the priesthood whose life is summed up in one of the shortest psalms; Behold, bless ye the LORD, all ye servants of the LORD, which by night stand in the house of the LORD. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the LORD. (Psalms 134:1-2 KJV) This is an wonderful picture of priesthood. These men are not busy in the outer sanctuary with the rituals of Israel's faith; they are not occupied with ablutions or bloody sacrifice. They are 'the servants of the LORD' who 'stand' in the house of the LORD. It is a glimpse into a forgotten aspect of priesthood; they 'stand' by night. They 'wait upon' their God separate from the busy-nesses of the day; they have passed beyond the sight of ordinary men. This service is unseen by Israel; they are the 'servants of the LORD'. In the outer sanctuary they will wash, kill, heave, cut, flay, burn, cleanse... but here in this 'hidden' service they 'stand'.

Israel's 'worldly sanctuary' was an amazing structure, designed, not as a canvas church building but, as a mobile palace. The tabernacle was not pretty from the outside; its outward aspect was of the shape of a shoebox and was black. Three coverings separated and insulated the inner sanctuary from the outside world. When the door-hangings fell back into place those inside were oblivious to all that was outside; they were deaf and blind to all worldly activity. The priests stepped into a little embassy, a bit of heaven's territory on earth. Day and night were the same there, as was war and peace or summer or winter. They were 'shut in' with God; the world no longer existed for them.

And they 'stood'. They had no other option; there was only one seat in the Tabernacle. In this mobile palace only the King had a seat in the most Holy place of all, and there He 'sat' between the golden Cherubim. The Holy Place had lamps and incense and bread, but no seats; here the servants of the Lord 'stood' perpetually. This 'standing' position of the priests is so characteristic of their role that the writer to the Hebrews uses the fact to show the absolute uniqueness and finality of Christ's priesthood; And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; (Hebrews 10:11-12 KJV)

The picture here with Abraham and with Israel's priesthood is of someone who 'waits upon' God as a trusted servant would wait upon the King. They stand because they are constantly poised to move into action. They function like a professional waiter; their only business is to be available to fulfil the diner's wishes. They wait in inconspicuous attention, ready at a moment's notice to fulfil another's will. There are angels who wait upon God too. His will is converted into immediate action by these wonderful beings. Ezekiel says; And under the firmament were their wings straight, the one toward the other: every one had two, which covered on this side, and every one had two, which covered on that side, their bodies. And when they went, I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of great waters, as the voice of the Almighty, the voice of speech, as the noise of an host: when they stood, they let down their wings. (Ezekiel 1:23-24 KJV) As they 'stand' in God's presence they veil themselves with their wings, but when they 'move' to execute God's will they are like lightning! In fact, they 'run and return' like a flash of lightning And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning. (Ezekiel 1:14 KJV). For those who have tired calculating how many angels can dance on a pinhead here is a new project; how fast can

they travel? A return journey like a single flash of lightning makes them the fastest creatures known, travelling at 362000 miles per second!! I like to think briefly of these creatures who wait, with let-down wings until they know the will of God and then, before you knew they had gone, they are back waiting for the next job.

Impossible things are possible to the man or woman prepared to 'wait upon the Lord'. But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31 KJV) This is well known verse but the KJV hardly does it justice. This is not 'renewing' in the sense of replenishing or refurbishing but 'renewing' in the sense of replacing old with new. They they wait upon the LORD shall exchange their strength... The eagle of the Bible is almost certainly the Griffon Vulture. In 1973 a griffon vulture was sucked into the intake of a jet flying at 11,270metres (37,000ft) (7 miles) over West Africa; this is the highest altitude at which any bird has been identified. Sometimes Christians seem to regard 'prayer' as a religious way of worrying, but you don't get to that height by 'flapping' but only by utter reliance on another power; with the Griffon Vulture, the thermals, for us, God Himself.

In Isaiah's day Israel might be justified in thinking her time was over; her glory all in the past but this is not the truth. (40:27) The remainder of the chapter and the first verse of the next are a call to faith and dependence upon this God; not a frantic call to action but a strong call to faith; the refrain of these verses is 'fainting'. Israel's God neither faints nor grows weary; his resources are never depleted. (40:28). And this limitless resource is available to those who do faint and whose resources are absolutely exhausted. (40:29) An older man views the apparent inexhaustable energy of the young with envy and wonder; but their resources too ultimately pass away and they too will faint and fail. (40:30) But they that wait upon the Lord exchange their strength

they, and they alone

shall renew their strength

shall mount up, effortlessly like the eagle

shall run tirelessly

and in the steady requirements of the daily plod; they shall walk and not faint. (40:31)

The culmination of Isaiah 40 is in Chapter 41. Bustle and business is prohibited. Spiritual energy is not renewed by technique or determination; or by our decisions or promises. The revelation of an eternal truth is followed by an invitation which has a telling sequence; Keep silence before me, O islands; and let the peoples renew their strength: let them come near; THEN let them speak; let us come near together to judgment. (Isaiah 41:1 ASV)

Do we always draw near before we begin to make our requests? Let's imagine an eastern court or throne room; the king sits in splendour and his servants 'wait on him'. They stand at the edges of the room instantly available but never imposing their presence upon their king. As they wait upon him, they are equipped to serve him. They cannot serve him at their own bidding but must wait for His. He guides them with his eye upon them. His signal gives them permission and authorizes them to serve him in undreamed of ways. Now, and only now, they can draw near and having drawn near they can speak. Weariness is no disqualification now, nor is previous failure an

excuse; the ruins of the past are no impediment, and weakness is no cause for discouragement. And now having drawn near they hear his voice; Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 2:4 KJV)

Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD. (Psalms 27:14 KJV)

## Chapter 41

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wait I say on the Lord

Our previous devotional found Abraham 'waiting upon' his visitors. His waiting upon God was not 'in order that'... There was no secret ambition in his service; it was simply the instinct of his life. He was not trying to gain God's attention to spring some long hidden request, but simply 'waiting upon' Him. From this simple availability came two wonderful consequences; the specific timing of Isaac's birth, and a revelation of God's plan for the world.

Let's take a couple of examples of waiting upon God; one from the Old and one from the New Testaments. The first is the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk is one of the most difficult Bible books to date, but as it happens this need not affect our current thoughts. It begins with a cry from the prophet's heart that his prayer is unanswered. It is a classic cry that could have come at any point in earth's history; God, why don't You do something? Habakkuk's horizontal vision has only taken in the increasing wickedness, and the undermining of God's law. His cry, as often ours, is 'How long?' The answer must have taken his breath away.

"Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days-- You would not believe if you were told. (Habakkuk 1:5 NASB) The NASB captures the divine protest; I am 'already' doing something. Although the prophet had not picked it up on his 'radar' God was already at work. He was doing something that was so extraordinary that there had been no point in sharing it with Habakkuk because Habakkuk would not have believed it anyway! This is humbling for a prophet! It reminds us of the Lord's word to His disciples; I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. (John 16:12 KJV). God then reveals what is already at work; this is an aspect of prophecy that is sometimes forgotten. Prophecy is not always prediction, but it is always revelation. Prophecy is the divine focus; it may be in the future, the present or even the past. It gives the God's eye-view of events.

For many decades the super-power of the day had been Assyria. Its grip seemed relentless and permanent; it had no real challengers. But God was at work. During the time of Uzziah, approximately 150 years before the event, He predicted that Tyre and Sidon would be overthrown by an upstart kingdom that no-one reckoned a real danger; Behold, the land of the Chaldeans--this is the people which was not; Assyria appointed it for desert creatures--they erected their siege towers, they stripped its palaces, they made it a ruin. Wail, O ships of Tarshish, For your stronghold is destroyed. (Isaiah 23:13-14 NASB) The Chaldeans and their capital at Babylon was one of history's 'yesterdays men'. The Babylonian empire of Nimrod had slid into oblivion, and 'was not'. From the graveyard of history God was creating a political prodigy; His word to Habakkuk is astonishing;"For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, That fierce and impetuous people Who march throughout the earth To seize dwelling places which are not theirs. (Habakkuk 1:6 NASB). It was as if in answer to our cries for revival God were to say I am going to raise up the Nazi's to do my purpose. It is not only historically impossible, it is morally unthinkable.

Habakkuk now has another reason for protest. God's word has proved true; Habakkuk did not believe, though it was told him. He launches into a passionate argument as to why God cannot do it this way; Are You not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge; And You, O Rock, have established them to correct. Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You can not look on wickedness with favor. Why do You look with favor On those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up Those more righteous than they? (Habakkuk 1:12-13 NASB) None of this squares with his theology; this is not the way God does things. What is a man to do with such a revelation?

Habakkuk's second chapter find the prophet is a more reflective mood, and gives us a glimpse into the way he intends to cope with this revelation. I think it is significant that he does not launch into a prayer meeting, or worse still, form a committee for the public reformation of morals. His decision is profound in its simplicity; I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved. (Habakkuk 2:1 KJV) The KJV margin gives an alternate rendering 'what He will say within me'. Here then is the prophets response to an impending tragedy of immeasurable proportions;

I will stand upon my watch he takes the place of the watchman, ready to give the alarm.

I will set me upon the tower he fixes his position in readiness

I will watch to see what He will say within me now he can do nothing more than listen to hear what God has to say.

God spoke to him and assured him that the predations of the Chaldean's would have their end too. In the midst of all the coming fog of war, its confused noise and garments rolled in blood, God has a final word for the nations; But Jehovah is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him. (Habakkuk 2:20 ASV) The response of Habakkuk is a wonderful outpouring of heart. There is an interesting sequence to this 'minor' prophet's work; through its three brief chapters it moves from a burden which leads to a revelation which leads to powerful and confident intercession. I won't 'spoil' it for you, please read Habakkuk 3 and see the power of this prayer.

This is the kind of prayer that those who 'wait upon the Lord' may be empowered to pray. All readers of SermonIndex should read it carefully.

Let's take a different account; this time from the New Testament. It comes at a critical time in the development of the early church. Unexpected things have been happening in Antioch in Syria. The gospel chick has broken from its shell and the gospel is being preached to Gentiles. The results were so fruitful that Barnabas elicits the help of Saul of Tarsus, and for a whole year these two and others became an integral part of the church in Ephesus; And Barnabas went out to Tarsus to seek Saul. And finding him, he brought him to Antioch. And it happened that many of them were gathered to them (with)in the assembly a whole year. And they taught a considerable crowd. And the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. (Acts 11:25-26 LITV) We are not to imagine Paul and Barnabas as the minister with the church 'under' them, but Paul and Barnabas as integral members of the church at Antioch.

After a brief relief visit to Jerusalem the life in the church at Antioch continued, with a wonderful glimpse into the simple pattern of their gatherings; Now there were in the church that was at

Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted... (Acts 13:1-2 KJV) I have purposely cut this verse short so that we can give a little time to the process rather than the result. Five men are named. It may be that there were other 'prophets and teachers' too. What would you expect the main responsibility to be of 'prophets and teachers'; ministry to the people in 'prophesying and teaching?'. That may not be the right answer. Apparently these men 'ministered to the Lord'. It is a comment that reminds us of the choice of the first 'deacons' and the reasons behind it; Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:3-4 KJV) Their first responsibility was to be continually available for prayer.

This is such a revolutionary idea in the 21st Century that we probably need to re-emphasize the fact. They were not 'ministering for the Lord' in preaching and teaching, they were 'ministering to the Lord'. Again it reminds us of another Bible saint; Anna who ...was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. (Luke 2:37 KJV) I cannot help but note that she did not use fasting and prayer to pry things from God's unwilling grip, but that she brought herself into His presence to serve God. The 'ministers' of Acts 13 were ministering to the Lord.

This is the New Testament first use of this particular word for 'ministering' but it is the word used in connection with the priestly responsibilities of the Old Covenant; And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: (Hebrews 10:11 KJV) Those priests who 'stood daily' did so in their 'ministry' to God. We now have a vivid picture of the saints in Antioch; they 'stand' (in spirit) 'ministering to the Lord'. These are genuine priests; not appointed by bishops or popes but by God Himself. They are 'waiting upon the Lord'. Like Habakkuk they are 'watching to see what He will speak within me'. And 'speak' He did; the launch of the gospel towards the West did not come from a missionary committee or from a convention but from a 'prayer meeting'.

Now we need to read the full verse; As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. (Acts 13:2 KJV) This word 'separate' is a very deliberate one; it is used of Paul to describe the cutting of the umbilical cord. (Galatians 1:15) Barnabas and Paul has served God as an integral part of the church at Antioch; they were members of this body. Now the time had come for their amputation. 'Separate them' says God 'for the work for which I have called them to myself' (RB Lit). or as the NASB translates While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." (Acts 13:2 NASB) The 'I have called them' is the perfect tense. It sounds as though the 'calling' was earlier than this, but now is the time for separation.

The 'church at Antioch' immediately respond to this word from God. This time I'll use the Darby translation; Then, having fasted and prayed, and having laid their hands on them, they let them go. (Acts 13:3 Darby) Darby brings out an important truth here. The church at Antioch did NOT 'send them away'. apoluO is not 'send away' but 'release'. The church did what God had requested; they

'freed them'. Whole missionary programmes are based on the 'sending church' but the concept obscures an important New Testament truth than the first missionaries weren't sent they were released.

In fact, the next verse shows very plainly who did the sending; So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus. (Acts 13:4 KJV) This time an entirely different word is used; ekpempo - despatched. It is a word that was used in the Greek of the day in commercial literature as 'export'. What a vivid picture of New Testament missionary work this is. They wait upon God together, available to Him, listening to what He will say. The word comes to the church to 'cut Paul and Barnabas free'. The church responds by loosing them, and the Holy Spirit 'exports' them to their next field of service.

There are some who think 'waiting upon God' is altogether too passive and pietistic, but Habakkuk 'waited' and the word he heard caused a passionate prayer for revival to rise in his heart, and the saints in Antioch 'waited' and the word they received launched a missionary enterprise that continues in its impact to our own day. Abraham waited and received the final promise of his son; he waited and the secrets of God's heart were opened to him.

Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD. (Psalms 27:14 KJV)

Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the LORD our God, until that he have mercy upon us.(Psalms 123:2 KJV)

## Chapter 42

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by faith Sarah...

Our devotionals have been focussed on Abraham, but perhaps just for a moment we can consider Sarah. Abraham is waiting on his guests and as he waits confirmation comes. I say confirmation, rather than revelation as only details of this word are new to Abraham; in particular, the timing of events. The timing is critical in God's works and ways. The early career of Moses is a pointer to this truth. In his address to the leaders of his nation Stephen refers to Moses and his expectations; And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended him, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian: For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not. Acts 7:24-25 KJV) This is a fascinating verse which indicates that Moses already had some idea of his future role, but Moses is ahead of God's schedule and the exodus takes place 40 years later.

Sarah's 'ahead of schedule' impatience had brought in Ishmael and now 14 years later she overhears the conversation between Abraham and his guests and her reaction, according to Genesis 18, is one of derision. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? (Genesis 18:11-12 KJV) This is a telling warning that God knows the secrets of our hearts. Sarah's laugh is 'inward', but God registers it all the same.

There is also a telling pattern here to much unbelief; namely that Sarah is looking in the wrong direction. Her response to God's word is an immediate reflection on her own state and is captured in the phrase 'shall I'. God's promise is often in the face of our self-knowledge. Sarah is old and she knows it. Abraham is also old, and she knows that too. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? (Genesis 18:12 KJV) Her past experience and that of all her race is against such a possibility. It is this horizontal look that cripples expectation, and God's first work is to get us to look up.

God replies to Sarah's unspoken protest; Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. (Genesis 18:14 KJV) Sarah has succumbed to the all-too-human dimension; this is impossible to me, just look at me and just look at Abraham. She laughs, the whole concept is a bad joke. God's answer is to say 'you're looking in the wrong direction'. The question is not 'can I?' but 'can God?' The question is not 'is this too hard for Sarah and Abraham?', but 'is this too hard for God?'

The word 'hard' can be translated 'wonderful'; Is anything too wonderful for Jehovah. The Greek Translation of the Old Testament (LXX) has the sentence which literally reads; not without-power is a word from God. It is the phrase quoted almost 'word-perfect' by the angel to Mary at her annunciation; ...no word from God shall be void of power. (Luke 1:37 ASV). Gabriel was not just reassuring Mary, he was reminding her. In Greek-speaking Galilee Mary would have known these

words and they would have linked her immediately to the account of Sarah's miracle baby. The words provide a wonderful insight into the way in which God works His works.

Perhaps if we examine Mary's question and ultimate response we shall see more clearly. Mary's question was Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? (Luke 1:34 KJV) Her case is different to Sarah's but there are similarities too; both are biological impossibilities. Sarah's biological clock has wound down and so has Abraham's. A baby from this union is quite impossible and Sarah's question is based on this biological impossibility. Mary's question is also based on biological impossibility; there is no biological father! Their reactions are similar. Sarah asks; After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? Her instinct is to discount the possibility. Mary asks; ... How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? (Luke 1:34 KJV) However, there is something in the tone of the questions that separates them; Sarah is querulous while Mary is stunned. But in each case the explanation is the same.

'no word from God is without-power'. I have never been able to understand why so many translations of Luke take the same route; with God nothing is impossible. The Greek word is *rhEma*; it means an utterance or saying. If we convert the negative expression into a positive one it will make my point easier to appreciate. 'every utterance from God is empowered'. The 'word of God' has life within it. Every word that proceeds from God's mouth has within it the power to enact what God has said. It is good seed perfectly able to reproduce exactly what it says on the packet, if the instructions are followed precisely. Every seed is a carrier of life; it only requires the right conditions for germination. Every word from God is the same.

Their initial reactions are different too. Sarah is afraid and denies her incredulous laugh; Mary instantly submit to the power of the word that has been spoken to her. If the verses from Luke are translated literally Mary's response makes much more sense.

Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? (Luke 1:34 KJV)

For no word (*rhEma*) from God shall be void of power. (Luke 1:37 ASV)

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word (*rhEma*). And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38 KJV)

Mary has fixed her attention upon the 'saying of God' not upon the biological impossibility. She has not only heard the 'word' she has received it. Sarah struggles with a lifetime's disappointment, and even when her unbelief is exposed she denies. However this is not the end of Sarah's story as Hebrews tells us; Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. (Hebrews 11:11 KJV) At some point in our story Sarah believed. This should be an encouragement to us all. She did not rise to faith in the first instance but subsequently she believed. Perhaps this is all the more wonderful as she would have had to acknowledge her previous unbelief. Hebrews now reveals details which are absent from Genesis; Sarah believed, and 'received strength' or 'power'. This is a reworking of the angel's truth. Sarah received power. No word of God is without power and Sarah received power. The same root words are used Sarah can only have received 'power' by receiving the utterance of God. The Bible is utterly consistent in its explanation of this process; So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word (*rhEma*) of God. (Romans 10:17 KJV)

The word for 'power' is *dunamis*; enabling which comes from inherent power. Let's remind ourselves that Sarah had no 'strength/power' to conceive. The account has been at pains to make this absolutely clear; there is no inherent power of conception in Sarah. Those days were long gone. And yet she conceives because she 'received strength/power'. Where did she receive the 'power' from; it was in the utterance of God to her. She received His word with its inherent strength/power. Word of Faith practitioners have developed this into a methodology but their hijacking of truth does not mean that everyone else should abandon it. To Sarah and Mary the 'utterance of God' came unsought. God broke into the ordinary pattern of their lives with a revelation and they 'believed God'. The seed of the word found good and honest ground and the ground 'swallowed' up the word. There is such a tiny but thrilling human link here. The farmer ploughs his land and sows his seed; the earth receives the seed and from then on the wonderful process of germination and growth takes place. The life is all in the word-seed but the word needs the earth to provide the conditions in which it can flourish. The seed cannot flourish without the earth, even though the earth is lifeless. The earth has nothing to bring forth unless it is sown.

The miracle is told in a single phrase; I planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: but each shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow-workers: ye are God's husbandry, God's building. (1 Corinthians 3:6-9 ASV) For those who have 'laboured' in the world of projects the word 'fellow-workers' is *synergos*, co-workers whose cooperation produces 'synergy'. It is a humbling and thrilling fact that without Him we can do nothing. It is a stirring and awesome fact that without us there are things that He cannot do, too.

As a result of the received 'word' dead things in Sarah revived, strengthless things were re-equipped to function as God had intended. Hopelessness was transformed into expectation, and failure into fulfilment. There is one more truth we must observe before we leave the Hebrews portrait of Sarah; all this was accomplished ...because she judged him faithful who had promised. (Hebrews 11:11b KJV) Sarah's faith was dependent upon her appreciation of God's character. It was not His power that brought her to the rest of faith but His faithfulness. The ancient world was full of 'gods' with frightening powers and the most frightening thing of all was their capriciousness; you never knew when you could trust these idols. Jehovah is immutable; For I, Jehovah, change not; therefore ye, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. (Malachi 3:6 ASV) The book of Malachi has some wonderful summaries of Israel's history; it begins with the statement I have loved you, saith Jehovah... (Malachi 1:2a ASV) Israel's survival had been the consequence not of their own stability but of God's.

In the midst of her distress and fear Sarah came to a place of confidence in who God was. As far as I am aware this is the only reference to Sarah's personal relationship with God in the scripture; she judged Him faithful who had promised. She 'judged Him'. The different versions are not quite sure what to do with the word that the KJV translates as 'judge'; the NASB has 'considered', the ASV has 'counted', the ISV has 'convinced'. It is a word which signifies 'leading' or 'directing'. There is a process of the mind at work here. Sarah sets her thoughts in the direction of on the Faithful One who had promised. It appears that when God utters, we have judgements to make. We can set our sights on our own condition and the sure result will be barrenness and death, failure and continuing frustration... or we can set our sights upon the Faithful One who has

promised and the sure result will be fruitfulness and life, achievement and fulfilment.

The redemptive purpose of God in history moved on another step because By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. (Hebrews 11:11 NASB) Every word God speaks is instinct with life and power and awaits our response.

## Chapter 43

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Shall I hide from Abraham...

We come now to the passage which was in my mind when we first began this journey, almost a year ago.

It seems that the primary purpose of the visit to Abraham's tent was Sarah's annunciation; the specific promise and date of the birth of Isaac. However, as Abraham continues to 'wait upon' his guests another theme arises. Their visit was concluded and the visitors leave. Abraham decides to accompany them on the initial part of their journey. And the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom: and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; (Genesis 18:16-17 KJV) What an amazing narrative begins in these simple words.

In some middle-eastern cultures you continued to have responsibility for your guests while 'your food is in their bellies'. I recall personally a meal with a Nepali family in NE India where they insisted, Nepali style, in accompanying their guest back to the place they slept in; a round journey of some 10 miles. The hosts could not be persuaded to let the guests leave unaccompanied. It is probably in this kind of setting that Abraham accompanies his guests on the first part of their journey. If he had not this account would never have been written.

Somewhere on their journey ...LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." (Genesis 18:17-19 NASB)) I want to understand how God is thinking here. There are vital secrets of intercession being laid down here. Abraham is about to be drawn into vital responsibility in the outworking of God's purposes. Perhaps at some time he asked the question, why me?

It's a good question. Judas saith unto him, not Iscariot, Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world? (John 14:22 KJV) Why us and not them? Why me and not him? The answer of Christ is simple but significant. We are not asking the question 'why should I have been saved and not another?' That's another good question, but one without any answer in the main. Judas (also known as Thaddeus and Lebbeus) has heard the answer to his question, but Christ will repeat it and add a further explanation. Christ has promised a coming 'day' and declares that In that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. He that has my commandments and keeps them, he it is that loves me; but he that loves me shall be loved by my Father, and I will love him and will manifest myself to him. (John 14:20-21 Darby)

I want to split this verse to make my point. The initial experience is to be one of the indwelling God. None of this is primarily dependent upon the believer but is the free gift of the God. The Father would fulfil His promise to the Son and the Son would fulfil His promise to the waiting disciples

(Acts 2:33). All this would be because of the Son's achievement on the cross; there is no human contribution thus far. But the words move on to link human condition with divine blessing; He that has my commandments and keeps them, he it is that loves me; but he that loves me shall be loved by my Father, and I will love him and will manifest myself to him. This speaks to me of something more. The disciples' obedience is a consequence of their love to God, but that obedience is also a condition of God's self revelation.

It is such an obvious statement but we will make it nevertheless; some blessings are unconditional and some blessings are very conditional. Christ's self-disclosure, his 'manifesting of himself', to the disciples was to be dependent upon their obedience to what He had said to them. This is a cycle that we have seen frequently in the steps of Abraham's faith. God 'manifests Himself' to Abraham; that manifestation always brings with it a further revelation of the person of God, and always an implication for the way in which Abraham is to live his life. Abraham obeys, and the obedience fulfils the unspoken condition for the next revelation of God's person. As Abraham obeys he grows and his growing capacities him for further revelation of God's person. This is the truth contained in the words of Christ to his disciples. The man who keeps the words that Christ has spoken to him does so because he loves Christ. Those who love Christ (and reveal it in their obedience) are loved by the Father and the Son and are thereby capacitated to receive further revelation of His person.

Perhaps the simplicity of it confused Judas-Thaddeus. Surely it has to be more complicated than this? Surely it has to do with destiny and gifting and education and training and ... Apparently not. It is this simple; ...If any one love me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him. (John 14:23 Darby) [i[anyone[i] He repeats the word in verses 23 and 24 anyone. Surely this is for apostles and pastors and teachers? Surely this is for Spurgeons and Campbell Morgans and Tozers and Ravenhills? As we sometimes say in our modern idiom 'what part of [i[anyone[i] don't you understand?' But do note that there is a means of identifying the genuine from the fake here; If any one love me, he will keep my word. Faith without works is dead, and so is love. And note the order, we do not love Him because we keep His word, we keep his word because we love Him, we do not keep His word in order to love Him, we keep His word because we do love Him. If we don't keep His word it is because we do not love Him.

The Lord goes on to make an astonishing statement to those who genuinely love Him; ...we will come to him and make our home with him."(John 14:23 RSV) 'Our home', what an extraordinary statement, our 'abiding place'. I am not suggesting that the Father and the Son will absent themselves if the conditions change but just emphasizing 'residence' over 'experience'. Our crisis experiences of God are vital but this is 'state'; and this is wonderfully personal. Most of the promises of the coming of the Spirit were corporate and use the plural 'you', but this is intensely personal; we will come to him and will create our dwelling place with him. It was to these men that Jesus, in the next chapter, declared; Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. (John 15:14-15 KJV) No longer 'bond-slaves' but 'friends'.

God reveals what He is really like to His friends; don't we all? Jehovah has enjoyed the love and care of his host Abraham, and now the time has come to move on, but this proximity and intimacy provides Him with the opportunity to reveal secrets to Abraham. The narrative speaks of Abraham's destiny; ... Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? (Genesis 18:18 KJV) This man who is to become the source of such blessing is now to become the bearer of a terrible secret. What will he do with it? We shall have a glimpse into the heart of this man before our story is complete.

The next verse has a certain ambiguity. The more modern versions follow the line of the old American Standard Version; For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of Jehovah, to do righteousness and justice; to the end that Jehovah may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. (Genesis 18:19 ASV) where the word 'known' has the sense it often carries in scripture of 'acknowledging' or 'recognizing'. The ESV uses 'chosen' here to fix the sense. God has 'acknowledged' him as the man through whom God will accomplish His purposes. In later times such a man would have been 'anointed' publicly as God's agent. The blessings for all nations of verse 18 would only be possible through the faithfulness of God's man described in verse 19.

It is significant that it is at this stage of Abraham's pilgrimage that he becomes a privy counsellor. Perhaps that title is not well known to 'republican' readers of this column. The Privy Council was a body of the monarch's most trusted servants. If you are interested in the antiquated activities of a constitutional monarchy you can read The Oath of a Privy Counsellor. The twin elements are utter and absolute loyalty to the person of the monarch in thought, word and deed, and the promise to keep secret all matters committed and revealed unto you. It was not at the beginning of his journey that Abraham was admitted into the 'secret of the LORD'. It reminds us of the words we have quoted before; I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. (John 16:12 KJV) God had 'proved' Abraham in many a trial. He knew that Abraham was to be trusted. There is an old saying about Moses; he spent 40 years learning to be a somebody, 40 years learning to be a nobody, and 40 years learning what God can do with a somebody who is prepared to be a nobody. Abraham had turned his back on the comfort of Ur and the fabulous wealth offered by Sodom. His relationship with his God was in covenant; not based upon a passing experience but in solemn binding. He has allowed a continual stripping away of every human prop. Family, allies, wealth, status; even to the symbolic stripping away of his life and power. He had chosen, again and again, God's way. Now God acknowledges him as His own man, He will draw him into hidden things, and will place upon him responsibilities that no-one else will know of. He has become Abraham, the Friend of God. It has been a long journey, but he is ready now to begin his work.

## Chapter 44

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### God loved Sodom

We know this passage so well, perhaps too well. It is an amazing record of Abraham's relationship with the God who referred to him as Abraham, My Friend. I want to challenge some assumptions about these verses. There are some who see these verses as a blueprint for answered prayer and the role of intercessor. There is much we can learn about both prayer and pray-er in these verses but they ought not to be regarded as a methodology. The passage tells us not about technique but about relationship.

Some see in this passage the eastern bazaar and its traders. In this view Abraham is 'haggling' with God, trying to get God down to 'his price'. Some supporters of this view have even condemned Abraham for breaking off his bartering too quickly when a little more persistence might have saved Sodom; if he had got God 'down to five' they say Sodom might have been saved. This view conveniently omits the fact that it was God who ended this particular conversation and not Abraham; And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake. And the LORD went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place. (Genesis 18:32-33 KJV) The notion that God can be cajoled or brow-beaten tells us much more about contemporary Christianity than it does about Abraham.

That was a happy choice of word by the translators when they tell us that God Yahweh went his way, as soon as he had finished communing with Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place. (Genesis 18:33 WEB) This is an account of God 'communings' with Abraham, not Abraham 'bartering' with God. The word translated 'finished' here is significant too; it has the sense of something 'accomplished'. The purpose of God's communings with Abraham was accomplished; God's purposes were achieved. Abraham's prayer was no failure; the will of God was achieved. This, surely, is the purpose of all prayer.

Let's remove the concept of 'haggling' even more thoroughly. Abraham is in the presence of God. Before God Abraham lies prostrate or stands in readiness to serve. This is no bustling merchant set on getting a bargain. And this Abraham is the Friend of God. We don't bargain with our God or our Friends. The story of Abraham has led up to this point. I won't rehearse the previous 43 devotionals but they are very relevant. This is not the man who was born in Ur. Oswald Chambers often quoted snippets of a Tennyson poem;

Life is not as idle ore,  
But iron dug from central gloom,  
And heated hot with burning fears,  
And dipt in baths of hissing tears,

And batter'd with the shocks of doom,

To shape and use..

It is the figure of the blacksmith; "Battering" said Chambers, "conveys the idea of a blacksmith putting good metal into right useful shape. The batterings of God come in commonplace days and commonplace ways, God is using the anvil to bring us into the shape of the vision". Abraham's life had been on the anvil for more than a quarter of a century when we arrive at Chapter 18. This is not a man to 'bargain' with God. We have traced Abraham through many of his 'shocks of doom' but now we are coming 'to shape and use'. We have seen his devotion and sacrifice, his faith and abandonment, now God will begin to 'use' him. What a privilege to be 'used' by God. Don't despise the batterings; they are all part of His preparations. This is the man that God knows may be safely 'taken into His confidence'; God's Privy Counsellor.

God is omniscient; having all knowledge. Why then would He say; ...Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.

(Genesis 18:20-21 KJV)? We know so little about angels and their work but there is a consistent theme in the scriptures that they are 'recorders of events'. It seems they have a limited authority of judgment and action. Here are a couple of examples of individuals who came under angelic judgments;

1. This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men. (Daniel 4:17 KJV)

2. And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost. (Acts 12:21-23 KJV)

Both Nebuchadnezzar and Herod received a summary judgment and the angels were judge, jury and executioners. Sometimes, however, it seems their evidence is presented to God Himself. God does not visit Sodom and Gomorrah because He is in need of information but as due process of law. Why would God do such a thing? To whom is He accountable that justice should not only be done but be seen to be done? Only to Himself, but God's rule is not arbitrary or capricious. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? asked Abraham, right on cue.

God is constantly in court as the 'accused'. It is part of Paul's purpose in Romans to bring a verdict of 'not guilty' for God Himself. To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. (Romans 3:26 KJV) Paul is aware that what he is saying may lay God open to a charge of being 'unjust' and he is as anxious to 'justify' God as he is to show how God justifies the ungodly. God's honour was of essential importance to what Paul called 'my gospel'.

In the final Assize it will be seen that all God's dealing with His universe have been utterly righteous. Every cry of 'unfair' will be silenced. God's charge against His creation will be utterly

proven; Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. (Romans 3:19 KJV) In that day God will have no more 'accusers', every mouth will be stopped. Not, I think, out of fear but because God's case will be carried and mankind will acknowledge that it never had excuse or defense.

At that day we shall give our own account; [b So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. [/b](Romans 14:12 KJV) Is that the day when we shall 'judge angels'? God rules in righteousness, always has and always will. But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. (Hebrews 1:8-9 KJV) As the psalmist said; [/b] ... for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity. [/b](Psalms 98:9 KJV) God Himself then must do all that He does righteously; He cannot behave inconsistently with His character.

So He sends his two witnesses to Sodom and Gomorrah now; this is the due process for God's policing of His universe. The 'cry' of Sodom and Gomorrah is great. There are mysterious things here that we can only grasp faintly. The very first thing that we are told about 'blood' in the scriptures is that is 'cries'; And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; (Genesis 4:10-11 KJV) The stain is indelible and the cry cannot be silenced. The cry of 'the blood' must result in God's righteous judgment sooner or later. We were placed as guardians of our planet and our deeds are written into its fabric.

their sin is very grievous (Genesis 18:20 KJV) says the Lord. 'grievous' is 'heavy'. One day He would carry them all in his body on the tree but all sin is 'heavy' on the Lord's heart. Some relish the thought of God on the rampage; giving Sodom and Gomorrah what they deserve. This is man's view of sin, not God's. Listen to the note that Ezekiel heard in God's voice; Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11 KJV) There is a story told of Horatio Bonar talking to his friend Robert Murray M'Cheyne. "What text did you preach on?" said M'Cheyne. "The wicked shall be turned into hell..." (Psalms 9:17a KJV) replied Bonar. "and did you preach it with tears?" asked M'Cheyne. Dr R W Dale once told Campbell Morgan that he had known one man who, he felt, had perfect right to talk about Hell, and that man was D L Moody. He stated that the reason he so felt was that he never heard Moody refer to Hell without tears in his voice. Isaiah spoke of God's impending judgments and called them God's 'strange work'; For the LORD shall rise up as in mount Perazim, he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, his strange work; and bring to pass his act, his strange act. (Isaiah 28:21 KJV) God does not rush to judgment; neither do his Friends.

Listen to the tears in God's voice; And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. (Genesis 6:6 KJV) The word grieved means to pierce or carve. it cut Him to the heart If we cannot feel like this about the sinner and his sin we cannot speak for

God. If we cannot 'grieve' for Sodom and Gomorrah we cannot pray as Abraham prayed. Let's leave our devotion at this point. God grieving, the witnesses on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah,.and Abraham, the Friend of God, still standing before his Lord.

## Chapter 45

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### Beware the Bildads

I'm going give a little time to meditation on this issue of God's Justice.

For generations atheists have said it is not possible for God to be all loving, all knowing and all powerful at the same time. Two out of three they say are possible but not three out of three. Pause a moment before you read on to think this through. Is it a legitimate objection? You can see the different permutations. Their reasoning is thus; God might know all and have all power, but if so then He plainly doesn't care. Or they say; God might have all power and be all loving, but if so then there are plainly some situations He doesn't know about. See the pattern? Why not work out the last permutation for yourself?

At this point in the history of Abraham, the Friend of God, Abraham is posing the same question in his own way. And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? (Genesis 18:23 KJV) Our English versions obscure the fact that both 'the righteous' and 'the wicked' are singular. Abraham is not just speaking of 'the righteous' as a class but 'the righteous (man)' i.e. 'the individual'. Abraham is asking 'Do you not distinguish between a righteous man and a wicked man?' Behind it all the child's plaintive cry 'it's not fair'. Without going into philosophy let just say that the notion that things should be 'fair' is a powerful statement that man is not an evolved animal. He has, innately, a sense of justice. He may try to manipulate 'justice' for his own ends but underlying even his manipulation is the need to 'justify' his action. Why should a man need to justify himself unless he has a moral dimension that cannot be explained. The child has a sense of 'fair' long before he has been shaped by his culture.

It is important to understand that Abraham is not staging a protest here. Follow the movement as this passage is introduced; And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the LORD. And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? (Genesis 18:22-23 KJV) As the angel watchers start their journey towards Sodom Abraham 'stood yet before Jehovah'. This is the man waiting upon his guest, who is also his Lord. As any faithful 'waiter' he does not impose his presence upon his Lord; he waits at his side, inconspicuously. When the watchers leave however Abraham changes his position; Abraham drew near. Ah, what a wealth there is in this simple phrase. Prayer, is drawing near. Abraham is not standing at a distance hurling accusations against God; Abraham drew near.

There is way of praying that sees a man rushing into the presence of God with his shopping list, but that is not Abraham's way. There is a kind of arrow-prayer which the endangered cry instinctively; Lord, save me. But this is the kind of prayer that is the way of the man who is a Friend of God.; he draws near. This is word used to describe the closeness of father and son; And Isaac said unto Jacob, Come near, I pray thee, that I may feel thee, my son, whether thou be my very son Esau or not. (Genesis 27:21 KJV) Jacob is near enough to be embraced here; the phrase is

used several times in the story of Isaac and Jacob. Close enough to smell, close enough to touch; close enough to hear the gentlest whispers; Abraham drew near. The wonderful account of grandfather Israel with Ephraim and Manasseh uses the word too; Now the eyes of Israel were dim for age, so that he could not see. And he brought them near unto him; and he kissed them, and embraced them. (Genesis 48:10 KJV). Near enough to embrace, near enough to kiss; Abraham drew near. It is used of the most intimate nearness of all; And he said unto the people, Be ready against the third day: come not near a woman. (Exodus 19:15 ASV)

I am emphasising this to make it clear that Abraham is not about to launch into a bargaining session with the seller. This is prayer based on intimate relationship. I wonder what image you have of Abraham here? Do you see him aggressively beating down an opponent in the market place? I have an image of Abraham by his Lord's side. The Lord's arm is around Abraham's shoulder and Abraham looks up into the face of the Lord who is his friend, and ask his question. There are no un-askable questions when God's arm is around your shoulders. Some people demand answers from God and get none, and to them it proves His non-existence. Abraham has 'drawn nigh' and he will prove the eternal truth of James; Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you... (James 4:7-8a KJV)

So now, having drawn near, Abraham can ask his question; And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous (one) with the wicked (one)? (Genesis 18:23 KJV) Abraham has revelation behind this question. God has said nothing about 'destruction' but Abraham knows that there is a pattern of crime and punishment, or at least, sin and retribution. Behind the apparent chaos of 'random' destruction Abraham knows there is a truth which must make sense. He also knows the essence of God's character; That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous (one) with the wicked (one), that so the righteous (one) should be as the wicked (one); that be far from thee: shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Genesis 18:25 ASV) There is a whole theology of justice here; where did Abraham get it from? This is sound theology, but we have to be very cautious in the way that we apply it.

About 400 years after this a theologian tried to apply it to Job, disastrously. Then answered Bildad the Shuhite, and said, How long wilt thou speak these things? And how long shall the words of thy mouth be like a mighty wind? Doth God pervert justice? Or doth the Almighty pervert righteousness? (Job 8:1-3 ASV) This is where the danger always lies for Christians too; the temptation to apply general truth to specific cases. Bildad had the same convictions as Abraham; he knew that God does distinguish between the righteous man and the wicked man. He knew too that judgement is part of the way that God works, but it was when he applied it the specific case of Job that he went astray. He was a good theologian but a hopeless pastor. Bildad's single step theology produces this diagnosis of the case;

1. God judges wicked men and they suffer.
2. Job is suffering.
3. Therefore Job is a wicked man.

God has a word for such theologians; Who is this that darkeneth counsel By words without knowledge? (Job 38:2 ASV) I visited Kiev in the Ukraine a couple of years after the Chernobyl

disaster. Many were living in constant fear of the consequences of radiation. I met up with a visitor to the Ukraine who was a self-styled prayer warrior. He explained to the gathered saints that he and others had been praying for God's judgement upon Communism. I recall his words "we have been praying for hammer blows to fall on this godless nation" he said "and Chernobyl is just the first". There are very few men who are authorised by God to say 'this is God's judgement'; the remainder are Bildads!

All suffering in our world is the consequence of sin. That is a general statement and, I trust, a true one. However, I must be extremely circumspect in the way that I map any one particular sin to any one particular suffering. In computer jargon, these are not one to one relationships. It is very tempting to say that Auschwitz or Chernobyl or 9-11 is God's punishment, but we must resist the temptation. There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. (Luke 13:1-5 KJV) The Bildads, of course, always have the answers and know exactly why the Galileans had 'suffered such things' and why a falling tower had killed 18 people. This is direct intervention, they say, this is God's specific judgement. Not so, says Jesus.

The disciples of Jesus had obviously been under the influence of the Bildads. And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents, but that the works of God should be made manifest in him I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day. The night cometh, when no man can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. (John 9:1-5 KJV with altered RB punctuation!) They want an answer to their question in terms of a simple one-to-one relationship. 'Who is to blame for this man's blindness?' is the underlying question. They then produce a short-list of the usual suspects; this man or his parents? 'Neither' says Jesus. The Lord is saying, in this specific case, there is no immediate connection between a particular sin and this man's particular suffering. It takes a brave man, a fool, or a Bildad, to say 'this is the cause of that'. Or it takes a specific revelation from God; this would be an almost unique revelation in our present day. It is not impossible but it is very unlikely.

Abraham's question 'perhaps there be fifty righteous within the city' receives God's assurance that, in this instance, fifty righteous would enable Him to spare the city. Again, please note the way I am expressing things. This is not a reluctant God being persuaded against His will. God's choice will always be to 'spare' whenever possible. Perhaps His answer surprised Abraham and he pursues his question but we see the same humble attitude throughout this conversation; 'I am but dust and ashes' v27, 'Lord, be not angry' v30, etc. Abraham's prayer has been the opportunity for God's mercy to be seen. God is not capricious nor does He work in arbitrary manners but there is a 'justice' behind His dealings.

For those who regard prayer as a means of getting something from God, Abraham's prayer is a total failure. But for those who see prayer as a means of providing something for God upon which

He has chosen to base His actions, this is a wonderful success.

When the point is thoroughly made, it is God who terminates this encounter. It was not that Abraham lost focus or was not sufficiently determined; And the LORD went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place. (Genesis 18:33 KJV) This was not a contest and there are no winners or losers. This was a 'communing'. It was not when 'Abraham left communing' but 'when He had left communing with Abraham'. It's a wise man who knows when to pray; perhaps it's a wiser one who knows when to stop. It is not wrong to 'draw near' with the questions that perplex, but it is wisdom to understand that simple questions don't always have simple answers.

## Chapter 46

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### Righteous Lot?

Today we will meditate on the walk of Abraham by contrasting him with his nephew. In writing the above title I was reminded of the story of a funeral. The deceased was a notorious character but the eulogies were flowing tributes to the sterling qualities of the dead man. "Go and take a quick look in that coffin" said the widow to her youngest son "we may be at the wrong funeral". I hope you won't think this too frivolous but it is my usual initial reaction on reading Peter's little eulogy to Lot; and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), (2 Peter 2:6-8 NASB) So far in our meditations Lot has not enjoyed a very good 'press', and there is worse to come. And yet we have the divinely inspired comment that Lot was a righteous man. How can these things be?

Lot, as we recall, was the nephew of Abraham but also his contemporary being the son of Haran. Many of the earliest Rabbinical and Christian commentators equated Sarah with Iscah of Ge 11:29 who is described as the daughter of Haran. This would mean that Haran was considerably older than Abraham as we know that Abraham was only 10 years older than Sarah [Iscah]. Sarah is described as Terah's daughter in Ge 20:12, but this could as easily mean grand-daughter in the usage of the day. This would make Sarah and Lot brother and sister. So Abraham may have been doubly bonded to Lot who was both nephew and brother-in-law. Bible relationships are not quite so precise as our English translations might suggest. Our unit is the Nuclear Family theirs was the Extended Family.

Lot seems to have been 'easily led'. He was taken to the city of Haran initially by Terah And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there. (Genesis 11:31 ASV) Later he accompanied Abraham as they left the city of Haran; So Abram went, as Jehovah had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. (Genesis 12:4 ASV) Notice the way this is expressed; it is pregnant with significance. The LORD had not spoken to Lot, but had spoken to Abraham; Lot was easily led. The danger in following another's 'word from God' is that when the trials come the 'follower' has no internal conviction to sustain him. He is plagued with 'what ifs'. What if I hadn't gone... What if I just do this instead... I have sometimes wondered whether this was part of the difficulty with John Mark's early steps; So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. (Acts 13:4-5 NASB) Barnabas and Paul were expressly 'despatched by the Holy Spirit' but no such statement is made of John Mark's inclusion

on the trip.

As Abraham's story unfolds so does Lot's; And Abram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south. (Genesis 13:1 KJV) It is not wrong to honour God's servants and to learn from their lives but we must come to a place where it is no longer 'and Lot'. The man had become a 'p.s.' to Abraham's life. The writer to the Hebrews makes an important and distinct comment when speaking of our exemplars; Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:7-8 NASB) It is not their route that we are to 'follow' but their faith.

Lot followed Abraham down into Egypt in what we described as a low point in Abraham's pilgrimage, and followed him out again. It may have appeared that Abraham and Lot 'got away' with this diversion from the main route, but there were after-effects. It seems most likely that Abraham's after-effect was a little Egyptian made for Sarah; her name was Hagar. The after-effects for Lot show through in another area. God blessed both men and their herds increased to such an extent that their servants began to quarrel over pasture land. Abraham's generous instinct is to allow Lot to choose which pasture suited him best. The narrative is chilling. And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. (Genesis 13:10 KJV) The feature that attracted Lot to this Jordan plain with its cities of Sodom and Gomorrah was that it was like Egypt. It is easier to get a man out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of a man. Something had entered in Lot's chamber of images; what he had set his heart on was a little bit of Egypt. And this is the essence of all compromise, just a little bit of Egypt.

The slide is on. Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the Plain, and moved his tent as far as Sodom. (Genesis 13:12 ASV) During the later wilderness years Israel dwelled in tents. Each tent door faced towards God's tent, the Tabernacle. The first thing they saw when they opened up in the morning was the Tabernacle with its pillar of cloud; For the cloud of the LORD was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys. (Exodus 40:38 KJV) When Lot opened up his tent each morning the first thing he saw was Sodom. What does your tent open out onto? What is the first thing... the TV, the radio alarm, the newspaper, the world with all its busyness or a consciousness of the Presence of God? It is impossible to start the day looking at Sodom without being affected by it. Sara Groves has a song with the lines...

In the morning when I rise • Help me to prioritize • All the thoughts that fill my day • Before my schedule • Tells me that my day is full • Before I'm off and on my way • • I want to praise you • I need to praise you • Let the first song that I sing • Be praises to my God and king • • Before the curtains part • Before my day is starting • Before I make up the bed • Before the snooze alarm • Reminds me that it's morning • Before the dreams have left my head • • I want to praise you • I need to praise you • Let the first song that I sing • Be praises to my God and king... That's a 21st century version of 'facing your tent towards the Tabernacle'.

By the time we get to Genesis 19 Lot is 'sitting in the gate of Sodom'. [Genesis 19:1] In Eastern cities the 'city gate' is the market, the seat of justice, of social intercourse and amusement,

especially a favourite lounge in the evenings, the arched roof affording a pleasant shade. Lot is no stranger here; he is 'at home' in Sodom. And yet Peter describes him as 'righteous Lot' and says And delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;) (2 Peter 2:7-8 KJV) The KJV uses the word 'vex' twice but there are different Greek words behind the English ones. The first word means 'to wear something down' and the second means 'tormented'. Lot was 'worn down' with the way of life of the people of Sodom and tormented by their behaviour. The next question is an obvious one; why stay? Because this is the nature of compromise... just a little bit of Egypt. There is nothing so permanent as a short term compromise. I went by the field of a slacker and by the vineyard of a man lacking sense. Thistles had come up everywhere, weeds covered the ground, and the stone wall was ruined. I saw, and took it to heart; I looked, and received instruction: a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the arms to rest, and your poverty will come like a robber, your need, like a bandit. (Proverbs 24:30-34 HCSB) Oh that we might 'see' and 'take it to heart'.

When the judgements were about to descend on Sodom we hear the prayer of the compromiser again; And it came to pass, when they had brought them forth abroad, that he said, Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the Plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed. And Lot said unto them, Oh, not so, my lord: behold now, thy servant hath found favor in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy lovingkindness, which thou hast showed unto me in saving my life; and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest evil overtake me, and I die: behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one. Oh let me escape thither (is it not a little one?), and my soul shall live. (Genesis 19:17-20 ASV)

His compromise ultimately dragged him into incest and the fathering of two of Israel's abiding enemies; the Moabites and the Ammonites. (Genesis 19:30ff) But was he 'saved' asks the evangelical? Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. (2 Timothy 2:19 KJV) He was 'righteous' says Peter. I don't know whether or not his 'soul' was saved, but I do know that his 'life' was wasted. I see that even when judgement came God demonstrated His integrity. Abraham had asked That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Genesis 18:25 KJV) But He did so not by sparing the unrighteous but by delivering the righteous. The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished: (2 Peter 2:9 KJV) Shall we see Lot one day? The Lord 'knoweth' but If we do, he will not be the only prodigal in that great throng.

## Chapter 47

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_47

Righteous Abimelech?

The Bible tells a highly selective story. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen. (John 21:25 KJV) John tells us plainly how he made his selection; But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name. (John 20:31 KJV) It is foundational part of Bible study to ask 'why was this recorded?' God has preserved records which have perpetual relevance; whole empires lived and died unrecorded in the scriptures but these are written... Genesis 20 is, on the face of it, just a tragic blip in the life of a great man so why is it 'recorded'?

The previous chapters have not only been more of Abraham's steps of faith but they have also been handling the question of a righteous God and His dealings with an unrighteous world. Genesis 20, to some degree, is continuing that examination. Abraham is on the move again. Perhaps Abraham could no longer settle within sight of the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah; perhaps he wanted to put some distance between himself and Lot's incestuous family. He heads south and west and arrives in Gerar. Gerar is in the territory that later was to be known as 'the land of the Philistines'. The lands now known as Lebanon, West Bank, Israel, Gaza were all originally known as 'the land of the Philistines'; in modern English, Palestine; although modern day Palestinians are not descendents of the Philistines. Later, in Genesis 26 their king is referred to as 'king of the Philistines' but it is unlikely that their king whose name is Abimelech was himself a Philistine and this is more likely to be a reference to territory rather than the people we later know as Philistines. His name is Semitic and means Father-King. Confused? I'll post an explanation here.

Abimelech appears on the scene with the same abruptness as Melchizedek and, like Melchizedek, he seems to have a knowledge of God. This was Abraham's mistake; he presumed otherwise. Abimelech asks what Abraham had seen which caused him to take this action. And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place... (Genesis 20:11a KJV) Ah, 'I thought'... how much trouble those two words get us into! We find the words on the lips of Naaman (2 Kings 5:11) and the troubled Psalmist (Psalms 73:16) Of course, it's not wrong to 'think' but in spiritual matters it is essential to begin with revelation and move on to thought. Reversing this process is disastrous. So Abraham misjudges the situation; the fear of God is not in this place. I wonder how often we make the same misjudgement. We react to a circumstance, a place, a person and conclude 'it is God-forsaken'. This is always a misjudgement; there is no event, no place, no person who is God-forsaken.

Abraham's misjudgement creates a mental scenario; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. (Genesis 20:11b KJV) What a well-trodden path this is. We misjudge, we build our expectations on our misjudgement, and we make our choices on the basis of it all. It happens to the best of us For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. (Galatians 2:12 KJV) Perhaps when you have read this account you have been tempted to think 'Peter, what were you thinking of?' Well, we know what he 'was thinking of'. He was thinking about those who 'came from James' and no doubt ran his own mental scenarios. A misjudgement, an expectation of trouble, a course of action chosen to anticipate and head off the problem which in its turn causes a bigger problem than the original possibility. Those who have never made such misjudgements and taken disastrous decisions based on wrong expectations will not understand all this; the rest will know the feeling only too well. What did Abraham and Peter and the 'rest of us' leave out of our calculations? Only God! Often our plans to avoid trouble get us into more trouble than we could have imagined.

I think the inbreathing of God into Abraham's and Sarah's names must have had an amazing rejuvenating effect on both of them. The scriptural testimony is very consistent, both Abraham's and Sarah's reproductive powers were dead; And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: (Romans 4:19 KJV) and yet from the age of approx 137 to 175 Abraham fathered 6 sons.(Gen 25) Perhaps the rejuvenating word produced physical and visible signs in Sarah; the fact is that Abimelech took her into his harem at 90 years of age. Abraham's fears seemed to have been justified.

The account continues with those words so loved by preachers 'But God...' In fact, for those who like such facts, this is the Bible's first use of the phrase. Against all the possibilities, probabilities and apparent inevitabilities of our calculations God intervenes and changes everything. Hallelujah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife. (Genesis 20:3 KJV) This is not a threat but an explanation. Moving towards the end of the chapter we find the record that So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children. (Genesis 20:17 KJV) It seems as though some fatal disease had gripped the royal court; this is the purpose of God's explanation to Abimelech. The reason he was at the point of death was because he had taken Sarah; But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, you are about to die, for the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife. (Genesis 20:3 MKJV) It seems that the contagion had spread beyond the royal courts; Abimelech pleads for his entire nation But Abimelech had not come near her. And he said, Lord, will You also kill a righteous nation? (Genesis 20:4 MKJV)

We then have the account of a remarkable dream conversation between God and a heathen king in which the king claims that his nation is 'righteous' and God apparently agrees with him, at least in the person of the king. Now Abimelech had not come near her. And he said, Lord, wilt thou slay even a righteous nation? Said he not himself unto me, She is my sister? And she, even she herself said, He is my brother. In the integrity of my heart and the innocency of my hands have I done this. And God said unto him in the dream, Yea, I know that in the integrity of thy heart thou has done this, and I also withheld thee from sinning against me. Therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.

(Genesis 20:4-6 ASV) Here is a heathen king with 'a pure heart and clean hands' and 'therefore' (i.e. because of his integrity) God kept him from sinning against me. How does this fit into your theology? When God sees righteous intention He can preserve even a heathen king from sin. The implication is painful but inevitable; we sin because we want to.

Abimelech doesn't know it but he has crossed a line. God must keep this bloodline clear; the purpose of all these workings in the life of Abraham and Sarah is to culminate in the coming of the Seed, and concerning His descent and identity there must be no doubt. The child that Sarah is to bear must have no doubtful paternity. There are consequences which are not direct punishments but God can use to illustrate truth. Abimelech is about to hear something which will set Abraham apart from all others. Sometimes the consequences of our choices bring us into great danger but even here God will use the circumstances to teach us His ways. Abimelech's family and people stand in deadly danger and there is something that Abimelech must do and something which another must do. Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine. (Genesis 20:7 KJV) Abimelech must put right what he can put right, but the damage can only be undone by another; God's man.

We are beginning to see a change in the story of Abraham which we shall observe constantly in the next few meditations. Abraham will begin to be a revelation of God Himself and His character. This is how he will bring blessing to others, not in his own inherent ability but as a living revelation of God. Abimelech is now informed that salvation is through another whose relationship to God is now revealed and whose words will bring deliverance. It is an amazing description that God gives to this heathen king. The man whose wife must be restored is described thus; he is a prophet and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live We shall dwell on some aspects of this statement as we discover God's preparations in the life of a praying man, but at this point we will just take the broad outline.

he is a prophet This is another Bible first; the first use of the word prophet. We have learned that the first occurrence of a word or an idea is often loaded with significance. Not everyone who prophesies is a prophet. I can drive a truck but I am not a truck-driver. I preach the gospel but I am not an evangelist. A prophet is a person who lives in this realm. His gifting has so percolated into his life and character that the two are almost indistinguishable. It is not possible to think of this man without thinking this is a prophet. What is a prophet? Well, in the simplest terms, he is a spokesman for another. He brings, not his own thoughts and solutions, but the words of another. He lives in such a relationship with his master that he is intimate with the way in which His master thinks. It is Abraham's many steps which have brought him to this place of nearness to his Master, and he will need to continue in the steps of that faith to maintain the relationship. He is not an ambassador sent abroad for long periods of time beyond the sound of his Master's voice; he lives in His presence. He knows His thoughts and has His ear. The prophet not only hears God; God hears the prophet. he is a prophet and he will pray...[b] How simply the sentence runs with its own sense of divine logic and inevitability. Did you expect it to say he is a prophet and he will prophesy to you...? No, [b] he is prophet and he will pray Genuine prophecy and genuine prayer have a common link; they are both born in revelation. Not speculation, not calculation, but revelation. Many will bring their 'prophetic words' arising from their own reactions to the moment, putting into words their own reasoning and conclusions, but genuine prophecy is born in revelation. Here is a

neat little definition of a prophet; (Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, thus he said, Come, and let us go to the seer; for he that is now called a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer.) (1 Samuel 9:9 ASV). A prophet sees but He sees what God reveals.

Abraham was in this dilemma because his natural sight had mislead him; And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing? (Genesis 20:10 ASV) Now he would see beyond his natural vision into the heart and purpose of God and the vision would be translated into prayer, and not the prayer of aspiration but of power; Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live (Genesis 20:7 KJV) Thus you may identify all true prophets.

## Chapter 48

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_48

a prophet?

“Abraham” says God “is a prophet.” At this point there is no explanation of the title or role. It was obviously something which Abimelech would have understood, a familiar term in his day but what about ours? Perhaps it is too familiar now that the word becomes an adjective and is added to other words as ‘a prophetic platform’, a prophetic lifestyle, and others. I always become uncomfortable when Bible nouns are used as adjectives. So what is a prophet?

We have a working definition in the scriptures in the relationship between Moses and Aaron. The concept arises from Moses’ sense of inability and sets the scene immediately for all future prophets; And thou shalt speak unto him, and put the words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people; and it shall come to pass, that he shall be to thee a mouth, and thou shalt be to him as God. (Exodus 4:15-16 ASV) It is an amazing statement in which God describes Moses as a god. It is important to recognize that what God is describing here is not an ability, nor a gift, nor an event, but a relationship. It uses the language of what I like to call an ‘!-thou’ relationship. In describing Aaron as Moses’ spokesman, God is actually describing Moses as God’s spokesman. It will profit us to consider these verses.

There is truth here which is hidden from those who use only modern translations. God speaks here both of ‘thou’ and ‘ye’; the first is singular as God refers to Moses, but the second is plural as God includes Aaron in His plan. We would get the sense if we added the words ‘both of you’ after ‘you’ and ‘ye’ in our passage. God was guaranteeing the whole process, both the inspiration and the transmission. Moses is to speak to Aaron and ‘put the words in his mouth’, but Moses’ words will be God’s words ‘I will be with thy mouth’. God will superintend Moses’ words as he speaks to Aaron, and will also superintend Aaron’s words when he speaks to Pharaoh. I will teach you (both) says God what (both) of you shall do. Moses will be inspired and Aaron will be monitored and kept true. This is the first indication of God’s methods of inspiration in the Scriptures and gives us a working model for the inspiration of Scripture itself. There are two points as which human error might have entered the scripture, inspiration and communication; God has under-written both.

Moses is to be God’s spokesman and Aaron is to be Moses’ spokesman. This is the simplest definition, the prophet is a spokesman for God; he speaks on God’s behalf. He may be a wonderful teacher or preacher, he may be a great theologian, he may be none of these; the essence is He is God’s man. “a spokesman for the President said...” We hear the words frequently and understand them to mean not only that this is a man-who-speaks, a spokes-man, but that s/he is the President’s representative. The spokesman is the voice of another; that is his glory and his caution against any superiority of attitude. He bears the authority and dignity of another; in himself

he is of little significance. The greatest prophet was John Baptist and we hear this consciousness very clearly in his own witness. "who are you?" demanded his frustrated questioners, He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord..." (John 1:23 KJV) I'm just the voice, says John. "It is of little consequence 'who I am' what matters is what I am saying." There is no conflict between style and substance for the prophet.

There is an old African proverb that says 'to hear you must be near'. The worth of the prophet will be directly proportional to his intimacy with God. He brings, not his 'considered opinions', but the very word of God. knowing this first, that no prophecy of scripture is of private interpretation. For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20-21 ASV) What a wonderful phrase that is, 'men spake from God'; God's spokesmen. The words were not the result of a prophet's deliberations; they were not personal interpretations of the mind of God, but they spoke as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. This does not mean they were in ecstatic states but that the whole dynamic of their operation was in the power of the Spirit.

Amos distanced himself from the professional 'prophets' of his day (Amos 7:14) but he was true prophet none the less, and speaks a significant word here; Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7 KJV) In the sense of their service to their Master, they are servants, but in another sense they are more. "Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do" God has asked earlier. He knows he can trust Abraham with his secrets; Abraham, My Friend. I recall sitting at lunch in the home of retired missionary from India. On the wall was a simple poker work text, it said, "Ye are my friends, if..." It provoked me through the whole meal. Conditional friendship? The whole passage is a great encouragement but we need that reminder of the initial condition; Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. (John 15:14-15 KJV)

When we get to the end of Abraham's story perhaps we should begin that of Moses. He is pre-eminently, the Prophet. Have you ever imagined Israel watching him entering the tent that he had set up outside the camp to be alone with God? And it came to pass, when Moses went out unto the tabernacle, that all the people rose up, and stood every man at his tent door, and looked after Moses, until he was gone into the tabernacle. And it came to pass, as Moses entered into the tabernacle, the cloudy pillar descended, and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses. And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the tabernacle door: and all the people rose up and worshipped, every man in his tent door. And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend... (Exodus 33:8-11 KJV) See the cloudy pillar keeping watch at the door so that God and Moses can be without interruption?

Moses and Aaron were not going to bring a series of suggestions or discussion points; they would bring a word born of God, inspired by God, directed by God, empowered by God, watched over by God; they were just men but they were speaking the word of God. When God's commission became His action the word 'spokesman' is not used; And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet. Thou shalt speak all that I command thee: and Aaron thy brother shall speak unto Pharaoh, that he send the children of

Israel out of his land. (Exodus 7:1-2 KJV) This is the full extent of the team; God and a prophet; immediate revelation and the commission to pass it on. Aaron would operate in the strength of Moses authority as Moses' prophet and Moses would operate in the strength of God's authority.

The prophet must hear before he has anything to say. The narrator of Samuel story explains to his readers the nature of a prophet; (Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to enquire of God, thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the seer: for he that is now called a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer.) (1 Samuel 9:9 KJV) The prophet must see before he has anything to say. The work of the prophet begins in revelation; Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. (1 Corinthians 14:29-32 KJV) The nature of prophesy in the local church is of a different order to canonical prophesy but the underlying principles are the same. A prophet speaks what he has heard and seen in the presence of God.

The Bible never explains the process of inspiration; it simply assumes it. There is a passage of scripture which my mind always turns to when considering these things. It is a song written by a prophet. My heart is inditing a good matter: I speak of the things which I have made touching the king: my tongue is the pen of a ready writer. (Psalms 45:1 KJV) Referring to this psalm Spurgeon wrote; Some here see Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter only - they are shortsighted; others see both Solomon and Christ - they are cross-eyed; well-focussed spiritual eyes see here Jesus only, or if Solomon be present at all, it must be like those hazy shadows of passers-by which cross the face of the camera, and therefore are dimly traceable upon a photographic landscape. The subject of the psalm is Christ and His bride but the author remains anonymous.

It is process of his inspiration that catches my attention. Something is a-bubbling in his heart. The translators ring the changes on his initial statement; the KJV has 'inditing' but others have the heart 'being moved', 'overflowing'. The Message has 'my heart bursts its banks'. The word means 'to gush'. He is quite prepared to do the work 'which I have made' but it all begins with that upsurge. The Lord declared that in teaching Then said he unto them, Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old. (Matthew 13:52 KJV) The order is significant; first the new which often refocuses and recycles the old. The old may confirm the new, but revelation must always start with the new. It is the moment of insight, not just intuition or the consequence of mental labour.

My pen, says our song-writer, is the pen of a ready writer. Of another occasion the scripture says Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus. (Acts 1:16 KJV) This is prophecy... 'the Holy Spirit... by the mouth of a man.' The psalmist knew that his tongue was the instrument of a swift writer. There is no struggle here for the finely tooled phrase; it flows from him. The Message puts the whole together and, again, catches the spirit of the whole in its paraphrase; My heart bursts its banks, spilling beauty and goodness. I pour it out in a poem to the king, shaping the river into words: (Psalms 45:1 MSG)

Prophecy is not always elegant, but it is always a flow. The stately elegance that readers of the King James Version are familiar with is the polish of its translators; the original is not always so

smooth. The translators had an eye to the music and beauty of the words, often the original is more rugged, but the flow is unmistakable. The prophet Ezekiel shared his vision of the life in the Spirit; the water of the Spirit pours from the temple and brings life to everything it touches; its banks are lined with fruitfulness as the river pours on its way. The Hebrew idiom is enlightening; the word for banks is 'lips'. The image is of a river pouring out through the lips bringing life... everywhere. Death and life are in the power of the tongue... (Proverbs 18:21 KJV)

I add my 'amen' to Moses prayer would God that all the LORD'S people were prophets... (Numbers 11:29 KJV)

## Chapter 49

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_49

So Abraham prayed... and God healed...

It is all so wonderfully matter-of-fact. Abraham prayed and God healed. In his dream to Abimelech God had spoken of Abraham in similar matter-of-fact words. He is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live... Abimelech believed this word and rose early in the morning to put things right. It is this 'putting things right' that connects this narrative, in my mind, with the closing verses of James' letter.

James' thoughts turn to prophets as he brings his letter to a close. Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. (James 5:10 KJV) He identifies two prophets in particular; Job and Elijah. Job he sees as an example of patient endurance; We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful. (James 5:11 NASB) I have switched to the NASB to highlight the fact that James is using different words. In general terms he speaks of the prophet's qualities of "suffering and patience" but of Job he specifies "endurance".

Most often, in the New Testament when we read the word 'patience' we should expand it to 'patient-endurance'. I recall listening to a lecture aimed at student teachers on the topic of 'special education'. The students were going to work with those we in the UK we describe as 'having learning disabilities', and whom the USA describes as 'mentally handicapped'. "What," said the lecturer, "is the most necessary quality of teacher in special education?" It was a 'set up' and the students walked right into it! "Patience" was the unanimous response. "No, no, no." protested the lecturer "what does patience mean 'waiting for something to happen?'" "What the special education teacher needs," he declared "is perseverance. You must stick at it until you get the result!"

The Greek word usually translated 'patience' in our King James Version is 'hupermeno'. As regards its derivation, it means to 'stay-under' something, to continue to bear the burden, to 'stick with it'. I recall an old Scots headmistress, who was a byword for consistency. "Christians who are going to be useful for God" she would say "are like postage stamps; they have to have stickability. She has been with the Lord for over 30 years now, but it's interesting that when I think of 'faithful-perseverance' I always think of Miss MacDonald! Job is not, biblically, the example of 'patience' but of 'perseverance'!

James moves on, but still clearly with the examples of the prophets in his mind; he is heading for Elijah. Elijah is an example too; this time, as all true prophets must be, of persistent and effective prayer. Let's follow his line of thought. He has spoken of sufferings and now adds his Spirit-inspired counsel for all who undergo 'suffering'. Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is

any merry? let him sing psalms. (James 5:13 KJV) “When the troubles come”, he commands, “pray”. The NASB gets the spirit of the ‘imperative’, Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. I wonder whether this is always our reaction to suffering? Some just grit their teeth and get on with life; that is either ignorance or arrogance. It is a reliance on natural strength rather than dependence upon God. And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint; (Luke 18:1 KJV) Ultimately we will find these are the only options; pray or faint. “If you are merry, sing psalms” is the other half of the counsel, and then he moves on to the issue of sickness.

I suspect that the ‘sick’ here are too sick to get to the meeting. Paul expects healing to be available through ‘gifts of healing’ in the gathered body, but James identifies the elders as the representatives of the local church, who are to be ‘called’; Is any sick among you? let him call to him the elders of the assembly, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; (James 5:14 Darby) Presumably it was not possible to get the whole church around the bedside, so its representatives visit the sick, at their specific request. Perhaps, in passing, we should just comment that this is not the rite of ‘extreme unction’ practised by the Roman Catholic Church in which oil blessed by a bishop is administered, by a priest, to a dying person to cleanse from sins in preparation for death.

The same matter-of-fact style we noticed at the first reappears here in James; And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. (James 5:15,16a KJV) Tyndale, who avoided the word ‘confess’ because of its priestcraft implications, has ‘(ac)knowledge your faults one to another’. This was my link to the story of Abimelech; prayer cannot ignore unrighteousness. The prayer of faith shall save the sick, but not by ignoring God’s righteous requirements. It is an axiom of scripture that If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me: (Psalms 66:18 KJV) It is a sobering teaching of scripture that ‘sin’ hinders effective prayer; Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered. (1 Peter 3:7 KJV) I wonder how much prayer has been completely neutralised by husbands not honouring their wives? Behold, Jehovah’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that he will not hear. (Isaiah 59:1-2 ASV) So Abraham, God’s prophet, will pray and the God will heal; but not at the expense of righteousness, Abimelech must restore the man his wife..

James now sets Elijah centre stage and leads into the power of Elijah’s example with a basic but vital truth; The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. (James 5:16b NASB) Some reading this NASB quotation will be sorry to see the loss of the word ‘fervent’. In fact the word ‘fervent’ is not there but the word ‘effective’ doesn’t do it justice either. There is such energy in this word; in fact, this is the Greek word from which we get ‘energy’ - energe? - to work in. Its implication is that the work is not superficial but thorough, inward, and hence effective. This is not wasted work but effective, productive work. The work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration is described using this word; And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, (Ephesians 1:19 KJV) ‘Fervency’ can be easily imitated, the energized prayer of a righteous man cannot. In prayer, it’s not the amount of steam

going through the whistle that counts but that going into the pistons. The sound of the whistle is exhilarating but it's the steam in the pistons that gets the job done.

James says that it is the righteous man who prays this kind of productive prayer. 'Righteous' does not mean judicial righteousness in James but outward conformity to God's righteous requirements. This is a holy man at prayer; his prayer has an inward power and availeth much or as the ESV translates it; Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (James 5:16 ESV)

James now illustrates his point by the story of a prophet. Elijah was a man like affected as we, and with prayer he did pray--not to rain, and it did not rain upon the land three years and six months; (James 5:17 YLT) Young's Literal Translation often reads strangely but we shall return to this verse to trace another truth shortly, and Young's expresses it best. Elijah was like us. We often find it easy to identify with Elijah's frailties but the events accomplished in this life were accomplished by an ordinary man... who prayed. His achievements were not the consequence of his greater gifts or better opportunities, but because... he prayed. If Elijah, why not me? What He has done with one, He can do with another. What He has done once, He can do again. What He has achieved through Elijah, He can achieve through you, if He chooses.

The KJV says that Elijah 'prayed earnestly'. Young's Literal has the exact words with prayer he did pray. To get the sense of this we need to remind ourselves that James is the most Hebrew-minded of the New Testament contributors and Hebrew has a special idiom for intensifying an idea; it repeats the word. The King of kings means the 'ultimate King'. The Holy of Holies means 'the most holy place'. Solomon wrote 1005 songs but the 'Song of songs' was his greatest song. When God warned Adam of the consequences of disobedience He said; but of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you may not eat, for in the day that you eat of it, dying you shall die. (Genesis 2:17 LITV) This was an ultimate death, not merely the ceasing of life. Keeping these Hebrew idioms in mind we can see why the KJV translators opted for prayed earnestly ; there is powerful intensity in this praying. Elijah didn't 'say his prayers' as children are encouraged to do, neither did 'he read prayers' as some religious systems advocate. Elijah prayed his prayer; there is powerful concentration in this praying. I am not referring to the kind of intensity that people sometimes develop; an obsession. This is the fierce uncompromising focus of a man who has entered his closet and closed the door; nothing may accompany him here. And none of his experiences here can ever be told outside, but the consequences will surely be seen. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:6 KJV) No other passions may enter to distract; "Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. (Mark 11:24 NASB)

Oswald Chambers once said that the will is the 'whole being' focused; If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. (John 15:7 KJV) Surely Elijah's whole being was in his praying. Again, I refer not to human intensity but that God-given ability of focus. "Every one that asketh receiveth." We pray pious blether, our will is not in it, and then we say God does not answer; we never asked for anything. "Ye shall ask what ye will," said Jesus. Asking means our will is in it. Whenever Jesus talked about prayer, He put it with the grand simplicity of a child; we bring in our critical temper and say—"Yes, but. . ." Jesus said—"Ask." But

remember that we have to ask of God things that are in keeping with the God Whom Jesus Christ revealed.” Oswald Chambers, My Utmost Sept 16.

How then shall we pray? With all known wrongs righted, with conscience dependence upon the inward Pray-er, secretly, giving God time to bring our divided attentions into His focus, asking, believing, receiving... praying, ...as we love, ... with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. The prayer of (this kind of) faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up.

## Chapter 50

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_50

I will... and Sarah shall...

At this point in our meditations on the life of Abraham, the Friend of God, we come to a new aspect of Abraham's life. We saw his first steps of faith and he turned his back on all he had known and went out not knowing whither... We have watched him come to justifying faith and become the archetype of the true believer; a man utterly reliant not upon an idea but upon the person and character of God Himself. (Genesis 15:6) We saw him witness a mysterious contract within the Godhead. (Genesis 15:9ff) We have seen the tragedy of his failures in the stories of Hagar and Ishmael. (Gen 16) We have seen him drawn into personal covenant with God sealed in the blood of circumcision. (Gen 17) We have seen his intercession as a 'friend of God' over Sodom. (Gen 18,19) We have seen his slippage back to natural resource and God's declaration to Abimelech that Abraham was a prophet and a pray-er. We come now to the birth of Isaac and Abraham as a personal revelation of the character of God.

From this point in the story we shall find Abraham as a type of the Father. Up until now we have watched his training, now we shall see God Himself in the story of Abraham. In the scriptures there are many types of Christ; individuals and stories which prefigure Christ's person and work. As far as I can recall Abraham is the only 'type' of the Father Himself. It is appropriate that this man whose name always included the idea of Fatherhood should now set forth some of the glories of God as Father. It is appropriate too that this new era should begin with the story of a Father and a Son. Later when speaking to Abraham of Isaac God refers to 'thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest'. It will be important to remember that this is how God thinks of Isaac. It is impossible to read these words without sensing how carefully God has chosen them. For the reader sensitised by the Spirit his thoughts move from the earthly pictures to the heavenly Father and Son instinctively.

And the picture opens out here in a miracle birth. Not a virgin conception as with Mary but the Bible's first miracle baby. Sarah's incredulous laugh is the equivalent of Mary's question; how can these things be? So far, in Abraham's story Sarah has been the passive instrument, mostly. The only incident in which she took the active role was the disaster of Ishmael's birth, but it is time to see Sarah in another light. Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. (Hebrews 11:11 KJV) It was not possible for Abraham alone to see the Seed into existence; it needed Sarah also... What a wonderful scene this is; these two ancient people living out their moments in vibrant faith. There is no retirement age for faith. It is not the special field of the zealous teenager or the strong warrior in the fullness of his strength. If Sarah had not believed there would have been no Isaac.

In Romans Paul focuses on the 'faith of Abraham' Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. (Romans 4:18-21 KJV) This is a wonderful exposition of 'faith' and we have unpacked it earlier in our meditations. If we had only Paul's exposition we would hardly consider Sarah's part in the moment, but Hebrews does not mention the place of Abraham's faith in the birth of Isaac but concentrates entirely on Sarah. It is worth pausing a while to consider, as the writer of Hebrews evidently intended we should, the faith of Sarah.

through faith also Sarah herself... Sarah's faith did not ride piggy-back on Abraham's faith; it was 'self-standing' faith. No doubt she was encouraged by Abraham's faith, but this was Sarah's own faith not an echo of Abraham's. When the angel visitors had called Sarah was hidden in the background; in the tent. Abraham is out in the public gaze and an observer could have seen the spectacle of Abraham's faith in many ways. Sarah's faith however is not in the public domain. Hers is the faith of the kitchen and the back room; this is faith behind the veil of public view. These are secret obediences that will never hit the headlines but which bring Isaacs into being. We marvel at Abraham's faith, and rightly so, but it will be good to draw Sarah's faith into the light for a while.

By faith even Sarah herself received power to conceive seed... (Hebrews 11:11a ASV) By faith, Sarah 'received power'. There is nothing passive about the verb translated 'receive' here; it signifies to reach out and take hold, to seize. The word for 'power' is 'dunamis'; inherent power. This woman, by faith, reached out and took the inward ability to conceive seed. She reached out, not in presumption, but in eager, urgent, faith to take hold of something that had been offered to her. And lest we should forget, the scripture reminds us, when she was past age. I don't mean to be rude or frivolous, but Sarah was 'past it'. This was no teenager; her life lay behind her, not ahead. Many come to a place where they are content to live in what they have, but not Sarah. Nor is this obscurantism; Sarah is not pretending here. She has recognised the hopelessness of her condition. The chances have all gone; life is over. The scripture is careful to tell us that both Abraham and Sarah were fully aware of Sarah's condition and of Abraham's; they knew that this was a combination of Abraham's body, 'now dead' and 'the deadness of Sarah's womb' (Romans 4:19, Genesis 18:11).

What was it that Sarah reached out to claim? And Jehovah said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, who am old? Is anything too hard for Jehovah? At the set time I will return unto thee, when the season cometh round, and Sarah shall have a son. (Genesis 18:13-14 ASV) She had heard a word which pointed her beyond her incapability and directly to God Himself.

Let's see the pattern of this. Sarah heard the visitors say Sarah, thy wife shall have a son. Her immediate reaction was to become aware of her own inadequacy; her language betrays her thinking 'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?' (Genesis 18:13 NASB) We can see that there absolutely no God-consciousness in this reaction; there is acute 'Sarah-consciousness'. She hears a predictive word from God but it only underlines her own powerlessness; the double 'I'

betrays her. Sarah is saying 'I can't'. How often this becomes our reaction to some promise of God; I can't. I can't. She had overheard the promise and did not believe it. We often overhear promises; they have no power until they are spoken to us.

This is where we must hear the word of God spoken directly to us. The response is wonderfully God-conscious. In response to Sarah's 'I can't' we hear God's 'I can'. Is any thing too hard for Jehovah? That is the question we must continually return to. Not 'can I' but 'can God'? Jehovah was no stranger to them; this was not a challenge to step into unknown territory, God had revealed something of the nature of Jehovah. God was answering Sarah's I can't with His own I can. Answer it, Sarah, in your heart. Don't just nod wisely and say 'yes, I see'. Answer the question; is any thing too hard for Jehovah? and then comes the specific promise at the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. (Genesis 18:14 KJV) There is a pattern here that we do well to take to our heart... I can't. God can. God will... and so you shall. When God says "I will" you may safely say "I shall".

I don't know whether or not she took hold of the word at that exact moment, or later. The account in Hebrews says that Sarah did something because of something else; Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. (Hebrews 11:11 KJV) Her stretching out to take hold of the promise was possible because 'she judged Him faithful'. Wonderful, Sarah, you've got it!! This necessary miracle does not depend upon your ability or faithfulness, but upon His. 'judged' is a good choice of word here, Sarah assessed the situation, and came to a considered judgment that He who had promised was 'faithful'. This realisation changes every perspective; He is faithful who has promised. Stack up all the 'cons', as high as you like, every impossibility, tick them off one by one; this is faith without pretending. Now that you have your list of why it can never happen here is a single fact to put into the 'pros' list; He is faithful who has promised. Does Paul's prayer for 'entire sanctification' fill you with desolation when you consider the impossibility of it all? And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23 KJV) If it does, good, but do read the next verse Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.

Sarah believed, not just for an exciting moment, but for 9 months of patient waiting. She 'judged' that He was faithful who had promised, and was prepared to base her life on that judgement. So may we.

I don't know whether or not a teenager in Nazareth ever thought about these things, but I do know that she followed Sarah's pattern. She was clearly overwhelmed at the visit of the angel. thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. (Luke 1:31 KJV) Her immediate question was 'How shall this be, seeing I know not a man The angel's reply, in essence, was very simple... The Holy Spirit. Gabriel then went on to share the miracle of Elisabeth; she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month were her that was called barren because with God no word is without power. For so the literal translation runs. How can these things be? Because God's word has power within it.

Mary's response was beautiful; And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38 KJV) May I extempore a

little? Let it be, not according to my fears, and self-conscious helplessness; not according to my feelings or what others have told me; but be it unto me 'according to thy word'. She judged Him faithful who had promised.

Although the circumstances must be very different to those of Sarah and Mary the declaration of Elisabeth will be true for each one of us; And blessed is s/he that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. (Luke 1:45 KJV).

The pattern always holds true.

I can't but God can. God will and so I shall.

## Chapter 51

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_51

Father and Son

In our previous meditation I made the statement that from this point in our meditations on the life of Abraham, the Friend of God, we come to a new aspect of Abraham's life. We shall begin to see Abraham and Isaac as types of the Father and the Son. Typology is a blessed and dangerous piece of country. It has been brought into disrepute by some excesses and it is now treated with acute suspicion by some branches of the Christian family.

What is a type? The word has to do with the shape of things and is where we get our word **type** from; the ink coated metal imprinting its shape onto the paper. The word is itself Greek; tupos coming from tupto meaning to beat into shape. So the word comes to mean a mark left by something applied with pressure. Its first use in our Bible is a sobering one; The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. (John 20:25 KJV) Not the nails themselves but the shape of the nails. Types then are the shapes of something much more real; they are the mark left behind.

Another word which links with this branch of Bible study is the word **shadow**. In writing to the Colossians Paul says; Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17 KJV) The Sinai laws were not themselves the reality but were the **shadow** of the reality. The writer to the Hebrews uses the same kind of language; For if he were on earth, he should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law: Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount. (Hebrews 8:4-5 KJV) The writer explains exactly how he is using this language a little later in Hebrews; For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. (Hebrews 10:1 KJV). The law, he says, was not things itself but a shadow of the reality.

We can see an association of ideas here. Both types and shadows give the outer shape but have no detail, no colour, no breath. They are visual aids and not the thing itself. We see to that the reality must exist before the type or shadow. This means we have to read the Bible backwards! Among the reasons that Tyndale gave for extensive study of Romans he included his opinion that it was the **best introduction to the Old Testament**. It is very important to realise that the reality must precede the type or the shadow. Even when they are **shadows of things to come** the sense is from the eternal to the timebased. Imagine yourself walking towards a bright light and you

encounter a shadow of a tree. In order of time you will meet the shadow before you meet the tree, but there could have been no shadow without the tree, or without the eternal light which cast such clear shadows backwards into history. If we are to understand the Old Testament it will only be in the light of the New Testament. I sometimes say that my bible has three testaments; an Old Testament, a New Testament, and an Old Testament understood in the light of the New Testament. Some Christians have never begun to discover the third Testament.

There are some types where the anti-type or the reality which gave the shape to the type, are clearly interpreted. The word is sometimes translated example, or figure. Adam was a type; Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. (Romans 5:14 KJV) The word is also used as an example of good or bad; Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. (1 Corinthians 10:11 KJV) and again Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. (Philippians 3:17 KJV)

Types and shadows serve as illustrations and Charles Spurgeon, his Lectures to My Students. once said a very important thing about illustrations. He likened them to windows through which light is let into the building. They are important, he said, but should not be too elaborate or draw attention to themselves. A stained glass-window only attracts attention to itself. Illustrations should serve their purpose simple. They are, he said, necessary, but beware of building your foundations of glass. This is very sound hermeneutics. Types must not be used to create theology but to illustrate it.

So let's take a look at Abraham and Isaac. The name Abraham has the title of The Father built into it, but the title only begins to make sense when it is used in relation to the Son. Abraham means the Father of a Multitude, but even a multitude must begin with a single starting point. Ishmael can never serve as a type of the Son, because Ishmael was the son of Abram High Father, whereas Isaac was the Son of Abra-ha-m the Father of a Multitude. It was always the Father's purpose to bring many sons to glory, and both The Son and the sons must have the same Father; For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, (Hebrews 2:10-11 NASB)

Father, what a wonderful revelation God has given us of Himself. In terms of son-ship the letter to the Hebrews refers to Him as the Father of spirits. I am so glad that God has raised me as a Father of my spirit, rather than a managing director, quality assurance or progress engineer! He doesn't inhabit the penthouse suite of the Head Office as the CEO, but is wonderfully accessible as a Father.

Surely it is significant that the father's son, is called Laughter; Isaac. In one of those mysterious glimpses into eternity that scripture reveal we see Father and Son in a snap-shot of eternity. Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; (Proverbs 8:30 KJV) daily his delight how long does an eternal day last? The picture is of a delight that never grows jaded. Did you see delight on the face of any children over Christmas? Did you see the whole person aglow with enjoyment and pleasure? He has his bicycle and his

world is complete; he could not possibly want anything else. If you did you saw a fleeting glimpse of ■daily delight■. Wesley tried to capture it in his hymn ■O GOD, of good the unfathomed sea!■

Fountain of good! all blessing flows

From thee; no want thy fulness knows;

What but thyself canst thou desire?

Through eternal days the Son was ■daily■ the Father■s delight.

If ■delight■ is the word to express the Father■s joy, how shall we express that of the Son? ■rejoicing always before Him■. The word ■rejoicing■ is the Hebrew word ■?âchaq meaning to laugh out aloud. You will have heard the word before, it is the name of Abraham■s son; yitschâq. Sometime coincidences are just too good to be coincidences! What a picture of ■eternal days■; heaven full of a Father■s delight and a Son■s laughter. There were no angels then, no sky or earth or sea or men. Just God. Is this what you had imagined? Or had you imagined the Godhead in solemn counsel? When God created the angels and the earth the mood is one of contagious holy joy; Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof; When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb? (Job 38:4-8 KJV)

When was the last time you shouted aloud for joy? Arise, O LORD, into thy rest; thou, and the ark of thy strength. Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness; and let thy saints shout for joy. (Psalms 132:8-9 KJV)

Can you imagine Abraham when Isaac was born? Can you imagine his delight? As a family we have just celebrated Christmas and the children and grandchildren have all made their visits. I wish you could see my wife at such times with 14 sitting around the table. It■s only for brief time but the ■family■ is together again; she would ask nothing more for Christmas. It■s a little heaven for her; all the flock safely gathered in. This sense of togetherness is a key part of the gospel story; Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. (Luke 15:25-27 KJV) We know the rest of the story but pause to think what did the elder brother hear? I have no doubt that, as well as the music and dancing, he heard a father■s delight and a son laughing out loud.

When the time came for the Son to step into humanity, He came to Jordan and the fulfilment of Isaiah■s prophecy; Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. (Isaiah 42:1 KJV) He who had been the Father■s daily delight had stepped into time as His servant, but the Father■s delight in His Son was undiminished.

That mysterious Proverbs passage goes further Then I was by him, as one brought up with him; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth;

and my delights were with the sons of men. (Proverbs 8:30-31 KJV) We have touched these things before. Before the creation the thoughts of the God-head were man-wards, laughing out aloud over the prospect of the inhabited earth, and delighting in the prospects of ■sons■. But before the sons could be gathered into the family home, Father and Son must make their way to a place of sacrifice and death. Only by this route would the sons be brought home. That part of our story still lies ahead, but we will never begin to understand the cost of that sacrifice unless we glimpse those eternal days of Father and Son in perfect fellowship of delight and eternity itself ringing with laughter.

## Chapter 52

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_52

The Heir

In our previous thoughts we concentrated on the type of Father and Son in the account of Abraham and Isaac. Today I want to consider the picture of Christ we find here under the type of the Heir. Back in Genesis 15 Abraham had been anxious about his heir. His fear was that, having no blood descendent of his own, his property would pass into the hands of his chief steward (literally 'the son of the house'); Eliezer. God had declared that this would not happen. And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. (Genesis 15:4 KJV) Abraham's possessions would not be passed on to even the best 'son of the house' but to a natural son. There is a difference between even the most faithful steward and a son.

Another possible candidate for inheritance would have been one who was a natural son, Ishmael. This passage of scripture will eliminate Ishmael as a contender too. Ishmael was not free; he was the son of a slave. Ancient cultures usually determined ethnic connections through the mother's side. There could be no doubt as to descent as regards the mother. A crude answer to the question 'who is a Jew?' is the statement 'he whose mother is a Jew or who has converted to Judaism.' Hagar's status had never changed, even though Sarah gave Hagar to her husband Abram to be his wife. Genesis 16:3b KJV Perhaps Hager thought it had but the angel who met her in the wilderness of Shur was under no misconception; And the angel of the LORD found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur. And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. (Genesis 16:7-8 KJV) Nothing had changed; she was still Sarah's house-slave. Ishmael's status was determined by that of his mother, not his father; consequently he was not 'free born'. Nevertheless, in the absence of a free, natural, son Ishmael might have been considered a candidate for inheritance.

In the emerging type of Isaac, there must be no possible misunderstanding. Isaac was not just the first contender among others; he was the 'only son'; And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. (Genesis 22:2 KJV) The scene for this absolute clarification is the event of Isaac's weaning. In the Near East of Ancient times the transition from mother's milk to solid food was much slower than our own. The final break with dependence upon the mother usually came at 2 or 3 years of age, or even later. David later used the picture to illustrate the end of dependence upon others and his total reliance upon God; Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child. (Psalms 131:2 KJV) It was a key time in the child's life when He must be

increasingly associated with his father and the future, rather than with his mother and the past.

For Isaac's official transition a great feast was held. This was a day of great celebration. The vulnerable years of infancy were passing. Isaac was the future. The joy of this event was marred by the behaviour of Ishmael; if Isaac was 4 years old, then Ishmael would have been 17. He was old enough to understand the significance of the feast for the heir's weaning. It is interesting too that the scripture doesn't even name him at this point but simply describes him as the son of Hagar the Egyptian. This is a description not only of his origin but of his status; there must be no confusion here. The Egyptian slave boy was 'laughing'; that *tsa■chaq* word again from which we get Isaac (*yitscha■q*). This time however it is not the delighted laughter of fellowship but the derisory laughter of the mocker. There is a cruelty here which is not explained; Paul describes the event as one in which Ishmael 'persecuted' Isaac. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. (Galatians 4:29 KJV) The New Testament word used here is sometimes used of 'pursuing' or 'chasing'. Ishmael harassed Isaac. Sarah instinctively knew that this was not a playful teasing but a more ominous aggression against Isaac, and carried her protest to Abraham; Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. (Genesis 21:10 KJV) She had seen that behind Ishmael's petty troubling of Isaac was a claim to equality and inheritance.

Paul takes up this record and draws some astonishing truths from it but for the time being I want to concentrate, not on the conflict, but upon the concept of the Heir. The Father's Son is the Heir; there are no other heirs. We may share His inheritance, but He is the Heir. Let me run ahead of my story so that you can keep it in mind as we meditate; there is only One Heir and all blessings and bounties that we enjoy are only possible as we are rightly related to the Heir. Later in our story of Abraham we shall see a 'description' of Isaac given to a prospective bride; And the LORD hath blessed my master greatly; and he is become great: and he hath given him flocks, and herds, and silver, and gold, and menservants, and maidservants, and camels, and asses. And Sarah my master's wife bare a son to my master when she was old: and unto him hath he given all that he hath. (Genesis 24:35-36 KJV) It is an interesting description for a prospective wife. There is no description as to his height or the colour of his eyes or his sense of humour. The only thing that the servant has to say about Isaac is 'he is the Heir'. him hath he given all that he hath. There is nothing outside the Son; to him hath He given all that He hath. Any provision, or blessing, or promise, it is all in the Son; He is the Heir. For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us. (2 Corinthians 1:20 KJV) It's all in Him; He is the Heir.

When the letter to the Hebrews opens we meet the Heir; God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; (Hebrews 1:1-2 KJV) Unto Him hath He given all that He hath. This is a then and now passage. In the past God had spoken to the 'Hebrews' by prophets; that was then. But in these last times, now, God has spoken to the 'Hebrews' in a Son whom he has appointed heir of all things. If He is heir of 'all things' what is available outside Him? The Heir had appeared and His coming had changed everything. Jesus had illustrated this with a parable in Matthew 21. The owner of the vineyard had sent the prophets 'in time past'; Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and

let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. (Matthew 21:33-36 KJV) and then having spoken to them through the generations through those He had sent... But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. (Matthew 21:37 KJV) This surely was their opportunity, but the response is chilling and shows the spirit of Ishmael But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. (Matthew 21:38 KJV)

What a terrible culmination! When they 'saw the son' they said 'this is the heir, come, let us kill him'. Ishmael alive and well amongst God's own people! It is part of the diabolical conspiracy to deprive the Son of His inheritance. Why do the nations rebel and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers conspire together against the LORD and His Anointed One: "Let us tear off their chains and free ourselves from their restraints." (Psalms 2:1-3 HCSB) But in the heavens is heard another kind of laughter...

We see, in Ishmael, the slave railing against the Son. It is the ancient cry of our race; But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us. (Luke 19:14 KJV) which must always develop from the refusal to accept His rule into full blown murderous intent; And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple from him, and put his own clothes on him, and led him out to crucify him. (Mark 15:20 KJV) All this is prefigured in Ishmael; the refusal to recognise the heir, the mocking, the persecution by the slave against the Son. The type was fulfilled in the moment of crucifixion. Here we see the Heir rejected; ... but this is your hour, and the power of darkness. (Luke 22:53b KJV)

But that is not the last word. Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. (Psalms 2:6-8 KJV) The Hebrews captures this theme again; ... when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. (Hebrews 1:3-4 KJV) He has finished His work and taken His seat; the inheritance is sure. The letter goes on to say; But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. (Hebrews 10:12-13 KJV)

What then of we rebels who defied His rule and set ourselves to deprive Him of His inheritance? This was the mood captured on the Day of Pentecost; Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? (Acts 2:36-37 KJV) Peter had the answer and the promise of an amnesty but in the context of these thoughts on the Heir I'm going to take the same answer from the closing verses of that wonderful Psalm; Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish in the way, For His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him! (Psalms 2:12 NASB)

## Chapter 53

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_53

No Compromise

From time to time in our recounting of Abraham's pilgrimage we have touched on a passage of scripture which has had a far-reaching consequence, and we have then followed the stream to its broader sweeps. The famous phrase; And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness. (Genesis 15:6 KJV) became one of the foundation truths of the New Testament. We did a major excursus at that point in our meditations. The conflict between the rival claims of Ishmael and Isaac also becomes a key New Testament truth, but one which is not usually quite so well known or appreciated.

Paul's letter to the churches in South Galatia is probably one of the earliest parts of the New Testament and was written long before the gospel accounts. This beginning of Paul's ministry, and thus the New Testament writings themselves, was occasioned by an early attack on the fundamentals of Christian revelation. Paul and Barnabas had travelled through the cities of Pamphylia and Pisidia and 'through much tribulation' had seen God raise the testimony of Christ in cities such as Perga, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe... and to the regions around them. (Acts 13:13-14:25) Usually they left one city for the next with a mob on their heels, and sometimes bruised and bleeding.

The enemies of the gospel had been out in the open and confrontations were frequent. There is a little summary of the conflict in Pisidian Antioch which with only minor variations was played out in each city; But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. (Acts 13:45 KJV) As the apostles persisted in their witness the opposition usually moved on to the next stage, again with only minor variations; And the word of the Lord was published throughout all the region. But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts. (Acts 13:49-50 KJV) Paul and Barnabas letter risked their lives in retracing their steps as they encouraged the believers; And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. (Acts 14:21-23 KJV)

Paul and Barnabas returned to their home church in Syrian Antioch. It was while they were back in Antioch that the satanic strategy began to emerge. In South Galatia the attacks had all been external; their origin and purpose was plain. The satanic weapon was the attempt of Diaspora Jews to destroy the infant church by main force. Such persecution has often been the history of

the Church, but the result is usually a purified and resolute Church. It was time to change strategy. This time the attack would be much more subtle. It would arise not from identifiable enemies but from those who seemed to be 'fellow-travellers'. Even high profile apostles would be enlisted in an attempt to destroy the Church from within.

In the providence and provision of God Paul was resident in Syrian Antioch when that church became the front line of the battle. We can trace the events with remarkable clarity through scattered references in the New Testament. It must be that the Spirit has determined to leave us a record of this conflict; it is of age-lasting significance.

Following his Damascus Road and Straight Street experiences (Acts 9:3. 9:11) Paul was active in Damascus; But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him: (Acts 9:22-23 KJV) It seems that in between these two verses he then took a journey to the Nabatæan kingdom with its famous capital city of Petra; the rose red city half as old as time. This is most likely the meaning of Arabia in the context of Galatians 1:17. Subsequently Paul returned to Damascus and then made his first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem some three years after his meeting with the risen Christ and his receiving of the Spirit three days later.

His presence at Jerusalem during this first visit was disruptive. I often smile at the juxtaposition of ideas in Luke's phrases; And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him. Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus. Then had the churches rest throughout all Judæa and Galilee and Samaria... (Acts 9:29-31a KJV) Paul then vanishes from our view for a dozen years, and doesn't reappear until Barnabas travelled to Tarsus with the express purpose of finding him and involving him in the work in Syrian Antioch. (Acts 11:25,26) After some time there a prophetic news-bulletin causes Paul and Barnabas travel as representatives of the church in Syrian Antioch to carry relief to the brethren which dwelt in Judæa. (Acts 11:29 KJV). This was Paul's second visit to Jerusalem since his conversion.

The secret war had already commenced in Jerusalem. Paul recounts his experience using amazing language; This issue arose because of false brothers smuggled in, who came in secretly to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, in order to enslave us. (Galatians 2:4 HCSB) It is the language of an satanic strategy designed to destroy the church from within; war by infiltration. The attempt was beginning to subvert the very nature of the gospel by perversion; ...but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. (Galatians 1:7 KJV) If you cannot defeat your enemy find a way to control him. Judaism, Borg-like, would 'assimilate' Christianity by gathering it into its embrace and controlling it. The outward sign of the assimilation would be the ancient sign of Abraham's covenant with God; circumcision.

Paul and Barnabas had taken with them a Greek, named Titus. Titus was to be the test case. The infiltrators wanted him to be circumcised, but although their efforts were intense they failed; the church in Jerusalem refused to compel Titus' circumcision. Not that this had been put to arbitration, Paul was immovable on this issue; To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. (Galatians 2:5 KJV) I wonder if we realise how much we owe, under God, to this man who was prepared, if necessary, to stand alone... that the truth of the gospel might continue. In fact, at the end of this visit James, Peter and

John extended to Paul 'the right hand of fellowship' recognising 'the grace that was given unto me'. Paul, Barnabas, and Titus left for Syrian Antioch, but this had been a mere skirmish, the real battle was ahead.

No doubt, at the invitation of the party from Syrian Antioch Peter travelled north. This is a sad episode in Peter's life, but he recovered from it magnificently. On his arrival Peter associated freely with the Gentiles. The verbs here all use the 'imperfect' tense; he was eating with the Gentiles (Galatians 2:12a KJV) This was his pattern until a 'delegation' arrived from James. At first glance this may appear that they came on James' behalf, but it may just be that they associated themselves with James and his sense of call to the Jews. Peter was afraid of them. What can this mean? What did he fear would happen? Did he fear James' displeasure? Did he think he could avoid trouble by a subtle compromise? He changed his pattern; when they were come, he was withdrawing himself, and was separating himself, fearing...Galatians 2:12b Fear had distorted his vision and crippled his walk. And others followed him; the other Jews...Barnabas also. The war was causing major casualties; Peter, the other Jews, Barnabas; it looked like a rout. The warriors are fleeing the field, the enemy is carrying everything before him, and one man is willing to stand his ground. What a debt we owe this man! Paul withstood Peter to the face, because he recognised Peter's culpability and hypocrisy. He saw clearly that this could only lead to 'Christian Apartheid' and rejected even the possibility; there could only ever be One Church.

But the war was still raging in other theatres. News reached Paul from the churches in South Galatia that others had followed in his footsteps with a systematic attempt to subvert the believers. Christianity was being assailed at its heart and at its borders; apostles and new converts were equally at risk. What was the real issue here? Acceptance with God; was it God's gift or man's achievement. Was Christ's death alone sufficient basis for God's acceptance or did we need to add some 'do-it-yourself' righteousness? Must the Christian achieve acceptance with God by the keeping of the Law, and therefore wear its sign; circumcision? Paul's reaction to news from abroad was to write the letter to the churches of Galatia in which he rains hammer blow upon hammer blow in his determination to remove every doubt, with its withering culmination; Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace. (Galatians 5:1-4 KJV) There can be no compromise. This is not a 'Jewish' variant of the Gospel; it is no gospel at all and those who say otherwise are under God's anathema.

Well, what does all this have to do with Ishmael and Isaac? Well, God's word to Abraham on this issue becomes one of Paul's hammer blows. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. (Galatians 4:29-30 KJV) Paul makes a series of shocking contrasts between the acceptable and the non-acceptable. He says that Sarah and Hagar are allegories of two quite separate covenants; For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this

Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. (Galatians 4:22-26 KJV)

Let's remind ourselves that Abraham's covenant was older than that of Sinai; 430 years older according to Galatians 3:17. The Sinai covenant was, according to Paul 'additional and temporary'. (Galatians 3:19) Paul is making a very disturbing statement; he is saying that Sinai covenant is obsolete. The Sinai covenant he says produces not sons but slaves; This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. (Galatians 4:24 NASB)

So what part does the Sinai covenant with its priesthood and law contribute to the gospel, and what benefits does it procure for those who adhere to it? It gives nothing, says Paul, and it produces slaves. What place does it have then in our thinking about acceptance with God? Could anything be made more clear? Howbeit what saith the scripture? Cast out the handmaid and her son: for the son of the handmaid shall not inherit with the son of the freewoman. (Galatians 4:30 ASV) The inheritance belongs to the Heir, and nothing can qualify us for any sharing in it, other than right relationship with the Heir. And right relationship with the Heir is not achieved by the keeping of a law, but the hearing of faith.

## Chapter 54

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_54

The Child of Promise

The typology of Isaac does not only relate to the true Son but also to all true sons. Paul, the apostle, refers to Isaac as a 'child of promise'; Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. (Galatians 4:28 KJV) This verse is the last of a series of 10 references to 'promise' in the letter to the churches of Galatia. Paul, immediately goes on to say But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. (Galatians 4:29 KJV)

We have to understand the nature and purpose of the Law to understand the implications of this. We must never slip into the kind of thinking that regards the Law as an enemy; Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. (Galatians 3:21 KJV) Paul expands this truth in the letter to the Romans; Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. (Romans 7:12 KJV) and again in his letter to Timothy; But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; (1 Timothy 1:8 KJV) This last reference takes us to the heart of the problem. In its essential nature the 'law is good if...' Almost everything in life 'is good if...'; an axe, a knife, and more surprising things like anger and hate; they are all 'good if...'

The 'law is good, if a man use it lawfully'; this is an 'if-then' clause. The clear implication is that if it is used for the wrong purpose it is no longer 'good' in absolute terms. This had been the problem of the law for the Jewish people; they had not used it 'lawfully'. That is to say they had not used it for the purpose for which it was intended. They had used it as a ladder by which they could achieve merit and consequent acceptance with God. It is absolutely true that there are only two 'faiths' in the whole of world history; the first says 'something in my hand I bring', and the other says 'nothing in my hand I bring'. The rest of religion is peripheral; the heart of the first 'faith' is I can and must do something to contribute to my salvation. The heart of the second 'faith' is that I cannot and must not!

Again, in Romans, Paul expounds this issue; For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. (Romans 10:2-4 KJV) One definition of the fanatic is someone who doubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim. If we have the wrong destination in mind the doubling of our effort will actually result in us becoming farther away from the right destination. The simple fact of the matter is that the Law was never intended as a route to God. Anyone who uses it to get to God is not using it 'lawfully' and the result will be death rather than life. For the Christian in his daily walk the same truth will operate. If

I attempt to 'do' something to qualify me for acceptance with God I am not using that thing 'lawfully' and the result will be, not life, but a death. If I repent in order to gain acceptance with God, I am not using repentance 'lawfully' and the result will be death not life. If I attempt to use prayer or bible reading or fasting or any 'thing' to gain or improve my acceptance with God it will bring a 'death' into my experience of Him. The purpose of these disciplines is not 'acceptance with God'.

Likewise the purpose of 'doing' the Law, is not acceptance with God. This 'doing' of the Law is sometimes expressed, in the New Testament, as the 'works of the Law'. What then was the purpose of the law? That is a question which Paul himself asks... and answers. Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made... (Galatians 3:19-20a NASB) It was 'added' says Paul 'until'. These two words are vital for a proper understanding of the nature and purpose of the Law; it was additional and it was temporary. The Law then was a temporary expedient with a definite cut-off date.

But why was it 'added'? Because of transgressions. That is to say the focus of the Law was not salvation but sin. It put sin firmly in the spotlight. It made it possible, in a measure, to quantify sin. The Law was never intended as a means of qualification and consequent salvation but as a measure of disqualification and the utter impossibility of 'achieving' salvation by personal merit. Again, Romans provides an expansion; What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "you shall not covet." (Romans 7:7 NASB) It was as a result of the Law that Paul recognised his true condition. Anyone can fool themselves into believing they are fit, until someone sets up a standard for fitness; this was Paul's personal testimony. So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful. (Romans 7:12-13 NASB) As a result of the Law 'sin' was recognised in its true colours; utterly sinful[i/].

There was another function of the Law which was to funnel the people of Israel into only one possible direction. If they adhered to the Law and its provisions it was a one-way street with no turn-offs which must inevitably lead to Christ. If you have ever watched sheep being transported and seen the way the farmer uses fences and gates to determine exactly where the sheep are going. They trot along in their little woolly-headed ignorance and each step leads them closer to the place that the farmer wants them to be. But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. (Galatians 3:22-23 NASB) The NASB's 'kept in custody' is not too strong; the word means to be under armed guard!

Paul then gives another description to the Law; it was, he says, our Child-Conductor; paidag?gos, i.e. a guardian and guide of boys. Among the Greeks and the Romans the name was applied to trustworthy slaves who were charged with the duty of supervising the life and morals of boys belonging to the better class. The boys were not allowed so much as to step out of the house

without them before arriving at the age of manhood. The Message Version has one of its frequent 'direct hits' here; The law was like those Greek tutors, with which you are familiar, who escort children to school and protect them from danger or distraction, making sure the children will really get to the place they set out for. (Galatians 3:24 MSG) That was the other function of the Law; making sure that the 'children' really got to the place they set out for.

In these passages Paul frequently uses phrases to divide time; 'until the Seed should come', 'before faith came', 'faith which would be revealed later', 'faith having come'. He is clearly distinguishing a new era that postdates the era of the Law; these eras are mutually exclusive. There is a clear time-line in his writings at this point. Something has changed. Something 'was not' but 'is now'. The paidag?gos, the superintending function of the Law, was only active up to this point. Up until this point, this was a 'lawful' function of the Law, but beyond this point such a function of the Law would be 'unlawful'. At this point the paidag?gos was redundant; But, faith having come, we are no longer under a tutor; (Galatians 3:25 Darby) Throughout this section Paul has constantly used the personal pronoun 'we'; he is referring to those, like himself, who had been 'under the Law'. When the Law has done its job of bringing Paul and his Jewish Christian brethren to genuine conviction of sin and to Christ, its work is over. We can see why Paul was so adamant that the Law having been honourably retired could not be re-commissioned in the lives of Gentiles who had already come to Christ; it could have no legitimate, lawful, purpose in their lives.

Are the Law and the Promise in conflict with each other? Not if the Law is used 'lawfully'. An axe and a surgeon's scalpel are not in competition with each other, unless someone is using one of these tools 'unlawfully'. Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. (Galatians 3:21 KJV) The Law had not been given to 'give life' but to 'describe death' and to channel men into the only 'giver of life'. It never was intended to be a 'life giving' Law, but was always intended to shut up every other possibility and to direct men to the 'life giving Saviour'.

Did you notice how Paul described Christ in his Galatians explanation of the nature and purpose of the Law? He might have simply said 'Christ' or 'the Lord' but he wants us to be sure to follow the flow of his thinking so he describes Christ as "the Seed... to whom the promise was made". (Galatians 3:19) Salvation was always to have been as the result of God 'keeping His promise', not of man 'keeping the Law'. Christ is the Promise-Bearer.

Of the 10 references to 'promise' in Galatians, 8 of them are in the last 16 verses of Chapter 3. If we asked the question 'but what is the promise' we could provide many different aspects of the one true answer. The promise is Christ, and He is the Promise Bearer. But how can Christ become real to me? How can I receive the promise? Christ died, according to Paul's argument here...That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:14 KJV)

Isaac, of course, was not 'born of the Spirit' in his natural birth. Paul is using the 'type' of Isaac as one whose life was due to the direct intervention of God. Isaac's was not a 'virgin' birth but it would not have been possible without the workings of God's 'life-giving' Spirit in the bodies of Abraham and Sarah. Nevertheless his birth was a direct result of God keeping His promise and as such he can serve as a type for the 'Spirit born'. All who have received the Spirit of the Son are 'children of promise' as Isaac was. Their beginnings and the whole of their lives are the consequence, not of

men keeping Law, but of God keeping His promise. They are the reality of which Isaac was the type. In their live there can be no mutual peaceful co-existence of the era of the Law and the era of the Spirit. If the old era of the Law and the flesh is allowed to survive there will inevitably be a relentless harassing of that which lives in the Spirit.

## Chapter 55

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_55

Beersheba, and the Everlasting God

It's time for us to rejoin the story line. Isaac is a toddler, and Ishmael is being removed from the scene. The events of the latter part of Genesis 21 all centre around Beersheba. Beersheba became the symbolic edge of the 'promised land'; the phrase 'from Dan to Beersheba' signified the whole land and is used regularly in the scriptures. Abraham has been given the land 'in promise' but has not 'occupied' a single foot of it; he is a sojourner. He is a sojourner, however, who is turning into a settler and this chapter relates part of that process.

Abraham's fatherly concern for Ishmael is clearly seen in his record. When the promise of Isaac had been repeated more specifically, Abraham's initial reaction had been to lodge a plea in Ishmael's interest; Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee! (Genesis 17:17-18 KJV) Later when the conflict between Hagar's son and Sarah's began to show itself, Sarah insisted on Ishmael's expulsion from the family; And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son. (Genesis 21:11 KJV) God told Abraham to listen to Sarah's request and Ishmael was banished. Hagar and her son are 'cast out' and wander in the wilderness of Beersheba. (Genesis 21:14)

Time can pass very unevenly in the book of Genesis and we need to keep our eyes open for clues. In Genesis 21:8 Isaac is probably somewhere around the age of 3 or 4, and consequently Ishmael is in his late teens. The next time-check we have is in Genesis 23:1 where we are told that Sarah was 127 years old when she died. How is your math(s) doing? Sarah was 91 when Isaac was born, so Isaac was 36 years old when Sarah died and that means that Genesis 21 and 22 cover a period of some 33 years. Much of this period is hidden from us; these are 'the Son's hidden years' which suddenly come into clear light in Genesis 22, but more of that later... The remainder of Genesis 21 tells of the earlier part of that period.

Ishmael would have been old enough, especially with his developing archer skills, to provide for himself and his mother, but his stamina is not up to the first part of their exile. When the heat of Beersheba's wilderness overcame him, Sarah abandoned him under the meagre shade of a bush so as not to witness his death. The events that follow are a valuable reminder that God is not only at work in the main plot. There are many 'Ishmaels' but the fact that they are not part of the unfolding drama of redemption does not mean that God has abandoned them. This young man has no covenant with God, but God hears his cry.

It puts me in mind of an interesting double miracle that might challenge some of our thinking. 5000 men with their women and children were provided with a table in the wilderness in Matthew 14. With five loaves and a two small fish the Lord filled the crowd. This took place in Galilee proper on the western side of the sea; they gathered the leftovers into 12 baskets. Following these events He travelled north to the area around Sidon and then returned south on the eastern side of Galilee. This area was predominantly Gentile and known as the Decapolis. And again, departing from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, he came unto the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the coasts of Decapolis. (Mark 7:31 KJV) This area was dominated by 10 cities with a high Greek culture. This time the Lord repeated the miracle but based in on seven loaves and a few small fish; they gathered the leftovers into seven baskets.

Twelve baskets and seven baskets; but the old KJV hides an important detail which some more modern versions have revealed; And they ate and were satisfied; and they picked up seven large baskets full of what was left over of the broken pieces. (Mark 8:8 NASB) The seven baskets were of a different kind to the twelve. The twelve were small, picnic size baskets used by travellers, but the seven baskets were donkey-panniers! Paul, later, hid inside one of these. So for the covenant people 12 small baskets left over, but for those outside the covenant seven enormous baskets left over. God has always had a heart for those outside the covenants. Ishmael may have been outside the covenant but he was not outside God's care and provision.

Our Genesis storyline runs on to a neat winding up of Ishmael's career. And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran: and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt. (Genesis 21:20-21 KJV) A natural river can never rise higher than its source, and Ishmael's story ends where it began... in Egypt. He has no part to play in the drama of world redemption and will not be seen again until Abraham's funeral. (Genesis 25:9)

The next little Beersheba cameo tells the story of Abraham's old acquaintance Abimelech, king of Gerar. Abimelech has obviously watched Abraham's life and is worried. He knows that Abraham is especially favoured; God is with thee in all that thou doest, now therefore... (Genesis 21:22,23a) Although Abraham has no title to the land and is a sojourner Abimelech is anxious for the future. He has arrived with his military attaché to put their relationship on a more substantial footing. He requests a permanent pact with Abraham that will continue through the generations of Abimelech's dynasty, and Abraham agrees. Before he does however there is little local matter that needs clarification; Abimelech's servants have moved in on Abraham's well.

This is another indication that Abraham is in 'settler mode'; he has begun to dig wells. Well-digging was very costly in terms of time and labour and they were vital to life in these arid wildernesses. Abraham had opened out sources of life for his people and 'the thief' came 'to steal, and to kill, and to destroy.' It is interesting that one of the few actions of Isaac, the son, was that he reopened these wells that the 'father' had dug and which later become choked with the rubbish of the Philistines. He re-opened the sources of life initiated by his father and made them available again for his people. (Genesis 26:17ff)

Abimelech protested his ignorance of the event and he and Abraham entered into a mutual covenant. Abraham further endorsed the covenant with a witness gift of seven ewe lambs. This nominal payment sealed the transaction and they called the place of their agreement 'the well of

the seven'; the place receiving its name from the seven lambs, by which Abraham secured to himself possession of the well – Beersheba. If this was indeed a 'purchased possession' it is Abraham's first legal foothold in the land; his second would be a tomb.

Things are beginning to look as though they are on a solid footing. His young son, heir of his promises, is growing up in this semi-permanent camp setting. The complications of Hagar and Ishmael have been resolved in their banishment, and now Abraham is on a treaty basis with Abimelech. The water supply is secure. Everything is looking good.

Perhaps there will time now for a season of quiet and reflection, and here is our final Beersheba cameo... Abraham plants a tamarisk tree in Beersheba. The tamarisk is still grown as a windbreak and its feathered branches afford a gentle shade from the sun. From here he can live in the evening of his life; watching...Isaac, his flocks. Thinking his thoughts and taking things a little easier... perhaps.

There are seasons in our lives and God works in many different manners in such times. Sometimes our lives are filled with activity and busy-ness. We seem to lurch from one crisis to the next and hardly have time to catch our breath. There is a lovely psalm which has become a lovely chorus; As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. (Ps 42) The modern chorus however hardly does justice to the real mood of the psalm. It is a scene of intense distress and the psalmist's soul is 'cast down'. Part of his complaint is Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me. (Psalms 42:7 KJV) It is a graphic image; the relentless beating of the waves has broken his strength. The NASB calls the waves 'the breakers'. It's an accurate translation and captures the mood; the experiences of life have crashed in on him. And the billows have gone over me; going, going... There is a special pain in the psalmist's cry; all thy waves, all thy billows. He has recognised the hand of God behind the experiences which have overwhelmed him. Any one can whistle a tune in the sunshine. It's when a man's head is under the water and he still finds the courage to cry As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, that you know God has done things in his life.

But it isn't all breakers and billows; sometimes its quietness and calm. Sheltered beneath his tamarisk tree, with his supplies secured, and the son in whom he delights growing before him, Abraham's seasons have changed. When such times come we are not to despise them; they are part of God's seasons. It was another psalmist who wrote; The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. (Psalms 16:6 HCSB) Cherish such times, but don't demand them.

These times can be more dangerous than the breakers and the billows. At times of obvious danger Abraham had built his altars and called upon the name of his God; now, however, is a time of tranquillity Abraham And Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of Jehovah, the Everlasting God. (Genesis 21:33 ASV). Many have the sense to call on the name of the Lord when the breakers and billows are going over their heads; Abraham had the wisdom to do the same when there wasn't a cloud on the horizon and every aspect was pleasing.

Perhaps he realized that men and women under God's training are never allowed to be spectators for long. Abraham was to be settled here for 'many days' (Genesis 21:33) but this was not the end

of his journey. The greatest expression of his faith was yet to be enacted. We have a new name for God here too; Jehovah, the Everlasting God. What a transitory world we live in. Our moods can sometimes be as fickle as April sunshine, and our plans overturned overnight. Here's a word for our hearts; God is the Everlasting God. It was at the closing of the Old Testament that God reminded His people of their constant failure and added ...I, Jehovah, change not; therefore ye, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. (Malachi 3:6 ASV)

I heard of a man who put a little poster on his wall with just two words on it; ...thou remainest. (Hebrews 1:11) What a revelation that is when it comes to the heart. All things pass away; but 'thou remainest'. My tranquillity may be turned into a maelstrom in an instant; but 'thou remainest'. All my theology has just been turned upside down; but 'thou remainest'. My ordered life has just fallen to pieces; but 'thou remainest'. My larder is empty; but 'thou remainest'. The man I trusted my life to has just disappeared; but 'thou remainest'. Where are you just now? Is life threatening to slip into turmoil? Yes? then here's a final one;

fill in the blanks yourself! .....; but 'thou remainest.'

## Chapter 56

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_56

Moriah, both of them together

Abraham sojourned in the Abimelech's territory for many days; this almost certainly means several years. The next dateable event will be the death of Sarah when we know Isaac must have been around 37 years of age. So how old was he during the recorded events of Genesis 22? Most Sunday School pictures show him as a child, or a boy at most. Josephus, the Jewish historian says categorically that Isaac was 21 in Genesis 22. How old do I think he was? 33 years old, and as we unpack this amazing story you will see that my answer is not really a calculation but a deduction.

The account begin with the innocuous word; and it came to pass after these things. After what things? Well, the happenings in and around Beersheba certainly, but more than that. It is 'after' all the previous events in Abraham's life. We are coming to the greatest test of Abraham's faith, but it is good to notice that it does not occur at the beginning of his story. It may have been around this same time that in another place a bewildered believer expressed his faith in God. This man's theology had been wrecked by the events of his life, and with no more theories to support him he delivers this astonishing statement; But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold. (Job 23:10 KJV) God knoweth the way that i take. Life is not scheduled according to some absolute pattern. Abraham did not drop from heaven into this moment of time and place; he walked here step by step.

Henry Ford was once asked what he thought of history and his answer was something like; 'it's just one darned thing after another'. He saw to sense to it, nor purpose. To the believer in any age there will be a sense that 'God is in this'; history is truly His-story. This extreme of Abraham's life did not fall out of the blue; he had been prepared for it. Every step he had taken had brought him closer to this moment when God could trust him to illustrate the deepest mystery of all.

God spoke to Abraham, calling him by name, his new name. Abraham's response is simple; he is available, instantly. This is the true mark of greatness that during the fallow years, probably almost 30, when the routine of life had settled into its predictable patterns, Abraham was immediately 'at attention'. He had watched Sarah slipping into old age, and watched Isaac growing through childhood and adolescence and full manhood; everything was set for the smooth transition into the next generation. To change the metaphor, this is just the right time for 'cruise control'; just go through the motions, we're home and dry. I recall reading this passage as a young Christian and being quietly outraged by it. It didn't seem fair; he had been through so much. Surely he can be left to enjoy his retirement now? It is a sobering realisation for a young Christian that his Christianity is not a single momentous event, but a pilgrimage that has no earthly end.

The story is told with great brevity and the starkness of it is inescapable. "Take now..." (Genesis 22:1) We have to maintain the walk with God that makes it possible for Him to say 'do this thing now'. Many generations later the people of Israel were poised to make their escape from slavery, and God instituted the celebration of the Passover. That first generation were to celebrate in a state of instant readiness; And thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: it is the LORD'S passover. (Exodus 12:11 KJV) Soon the word of God would release them; they must be ready for instant obedience. I wonder what God could say to us if we were ready? Are there things He has not said simply because we were not ready? Imagine if Pharaoh had said 'Rise up, and get you forth' and the people had said 'Well we have to do some baking and packing first. We could probably be ready in a day or two...' Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh. (Matthew 24:44 KJV)

Do you recall that the Lord said we ought not to undertake an enterprise without counting the cost? (Luke 14:28) God works on the same pattern. Before He created the world and mankind He knew what the cost would be. Calvary was not a reaction; it was the unfolding of a carefully costed plan. When God calls for sacrificial obedience in our lives too; he always knows the cost. He will never ask you to do what He has not done. Take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest... Can you see how carefully this is costed? Thy son... thine only son... the one who fills your life with laughter... the one you love... God knows exactly how much this will cost; that is the whole point of the trial. Are you tempted to protest; God what are you doing? Do you know what you're asking? Yes, He knows. Before the foundations of the world He counted this cost; "Am I willing to take my Son... My only Son... whose presence fills Eternity with laughter... My beloved Son... and offer Him...?"

If Abraham had not learned to recognise this voice he could never have believed that it was God speaking. He could not have believed this without all that had 'come to pass' previously. God knows the cost but He knows how to measure our pace too. We know the story well. Abraham is instructed to take another journey to the hills of Moriah. He is to take Isaac to be a 'burnt offering'. I don't know how many times I have read this passage and it still chills my bones. Abraham had long turned his back on gods who demanded human sacrifices. He had come to know the true God; the possessor of heaven and earth, the God of all Sufficiency, his shield and reward; the Everlasting God. Was this God really asking for Isaac? There is an extra poignancy in the command. Isaac was not be a propitiation; a price paid to appease an offended deity, but a 'burnt offering'. These were the 'free-will' offerings given with the choice and full hearted consent of the giver. Abraham was to be a willing giver.

The very abruptness of the narrative is striking. and Abraham rose up early in the morning... Not a word about the night spent with this word in his heart; not a word to Sarah, the companion of his pilgrimage; not a word of explanation to Isaac, at this point, just obedience, willing obedience. Four people were to make the journey; Abraham himself cut the wood for the sacrifice. Each stroke of his axe broke his heart. It says the ass was saddled. Perhaps this is an indication of the frailty of the old man now. The servants can carry the wood, and Isaac can walk, but Abraham must be carried to his appointment with God. For three days they journeyed and then Abraham lifted up his heavy eyes and saw Moriah; the moment was Abraham's Gethsemene. Was ever a man tested like Abraham? Was ever a man trusted like Abraham? This old man is going to act out Calvary.

Abraham then dismissed his servants. (Genesis 22:5) This is a work to be done between 'I and the lad'; no one else has any contribution to make. Only Abraham would have known it was by faith he made the statement; I and the lad will go yonder, and worship, and come again to you. Only Abraham knew that for this assertion to come true, there would need to be a resurrection. In our English Bibles this is the first use of the word 'worship' although the Hebrew word occurs earlier in the scriptures. It is a word which means 'to prostrate oneself', 'to submit in obeisance', 'to surrender to the will of another'. In our modern Christian culture perhaps we should ask again whether or not we really understand the concept of 'worship'?

An average Hindu cremation requires 650 pounds of wood (292.5kgs). It seems likely that Isaac was carrying at least double his own body weight to his funeral; another indication that the Isaac of these verses is in the fulness of his manhood and not a child. Abraham will carry the knife and the fire. It is the father who will smite; the son who carries the wood. There is a lovely phrase here which is repeated again in verse 8; they went, both of them, together Father and son, step by step, in perfect fellowship on their way to the place of offering and execution. It casts another light on the testimony of Christ coming into flesh; Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. (Hebrews 10:5-7 KJV) Calvary is not a merciful son placating an irate father, as is portrayed in ideas of the cross. Nor it is the will of the father imposed upon a reluctant son. Calvary is the consequence of father and son, going, both of them, together.

At what point did the earthly Isaac understand the full implications of his father's plan? We are not told. Isaac remarks on the provision of wood and fire, but asks where is the lamb...? What inspiration caused Abraham to reply in the way he did? God will provide himself a lamb... and they continue their journey, both of them, together. When they came to the place which God had told him of. (Did Matthew have this phrase in mind 1800 years later? And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, (Matthew 27:33 KJV)) Abraham builds an altar, Abraham lays the wood in order, Abraham binds Isaac, Abraham lays him on the altar, Abraham stretches forth his hand and takes the knife... If Isaac was 33 and Abraham was 134 these events could only have taken place with Isaac's cooperation. Into his father's hands the son places his life, and the knife is raised...

From heaven comes the restraining word; Abraham, Abraham, Lay not thy hand upon the lad... 1800 years later the events were repeated. Zechariah predicted them: And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends. Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones. (Zechariah 13:6-7 KJV) The sword is in the Father's hand. His victim is nail-pierced and as helpless as Isaac ever was, but there was no restraining word from heaven. The sword fell, and ...we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. (Isaiah 53:4)

In his emotions Abraham has lived the final blow, only in the action was he restrained. On looking behind him Abraham discovers a 'thorn-crowned lamb' and offers it in substitution for Isaac, and names the place after this latest revelation of God; Jehovah-Jireh; the Lord will provide. Perhaps

someone will stumble on these pages who has never glimpsed the greatness of God's love; For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16 KJV) God carried through to its bitter conclusion what Abraham was restrained from doing. Perhaps you have thought of Calvary and wondered what really happened here. Calvary is an eternal Jehovah-Jireh. It is where the Father provided a substitute for you. You have no contribution to make to this sacrifice; Father and Son have accomplished the work, together. You can walk free.

The letter of James holds this action of Abraham as the supreme act of faith. Abraham's works authenticated his faith; his was no idle pretend faith. James links together Abraham's justifying faith and the inevitable outworking of that faith; But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. (James 2:20-23 KJV)

## Chapter 57

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_57

God is able

In the National Gallery of the Heroes of Faith there is just one portrait that appears twice; Abraham's. Hebrews 11 twice focuses on this extraordinary man as a God-given illustration of faith. First the writer tells us that it was 'by faith' that Abraham obeyed, went out, sojourned and looked for a city.

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (Hebrews 11:8-10 KJV)

Surely Abraham's was a life of faith, from its commencement and every step of the way. These are the 'steps of the faith of our father Abraham'.

When it comes to the arrival of Isaac, the writer to the Hebrews singles out the faith of Sarah, but then returns to focus on Abraham at the point of the journey to Moriah; By faith Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac: yea, he that had gladly received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; even he to whom it was said, In Isaac shall thy seed be called: accounting that God is able to raise up, even from the dead; from whence he did also in a figure receive him back. (Hebrews 11:17-19 ASV) Being tried... in the moment of this greatest trial Abraham believed God. Temptations are a great opportunity for faith. Martin Luther once wrote "Prayer and temptation, the Bible and meditation, make a true minister of the gospel". It's an interesting list.

The story is graphically retold here; tried, offered, reckoning, received; the intention is regarded as the deed. As the old saying has it; "man sees the mark we make, God sees the aim we take." This is another important Bible principle, for good or ill. For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he. (Proverbs 23:7a) Abraham offered up Isaac. Not by strength of character or willpower, not in reckless fanaticism, but in faith. It is not the costliness of the sacrifice that is the focus but that which made the sacrifice possible; Abraham's faith. We often think of Abraham's amazing sacrifice but the Bible concentrates on his amazing faith.

The letter to the Hebrews declares that Abraham did what he did in the consciousness that 'God is able'. The ASV changes the tense. This truth sustained him on the three day journey to Moriah; God is able. Did he question whether or not he would be able to go through with this sacrifice; God is able. Knowing that he was heading for bloodshed and the conflagration of his sacrifice, Hebrews says He did it 'accounting that God is able to raise up even from the dead...'. It was faith in the

God who could create life which had made Isaac's birth possible. (as it is written, A father of many nations have I made thee) before him whom he believed, even God, who giveth life to the dead, and calleth the things that are not, as though they were. (Romans 4:17 ASV) This had been Isaac's beginning; the deadness of Abraham's body and the deadness of Sarah's womb and the God who gives life to the dead. Abraham had seen the miracle of resurrection, in a degree, in his own body and in Sarah's, but this was something different. Isaac's body was going to be reduced to ashes, but Abraham was 'accounting that God is able'. The verb is not there in the original but I like the ASV's choice; God is able. It was not the memory of God's historic ability, but the assurance of God's present ability; God is able.

This 'accounted' is the word that we considered in our meditations on justification by faith. Abraham believed God and it was (ac)counted unto him for righteousness. God measured and credited righteousness to Abraham's account on the single condition of his faith. Now Abraham credits God with present tense ability; accounting that God is able. The psalmist said Ascribe ye strength unto God: his excellency is over Israel, and his strength is in the clouds. (Psalms 68:34 KJV) Credit God with strength; credit Him with ability. Many years ago the English bible translator J B Phillips wrote a book entitled; 'your God is too small'. Abraham is 'accounting that God is able'. Much of what we do is based on a calculation of risks and resources. Abraham was no different. He knew the risks, but his calculation included the factor that God is able to raise the dead; and he was counting on it.

In parable form, says the writer to the Hebrews, Abraham actually received Isaac from the dead. (Hebrews 11:19) From this moment Isaac is the beloved son who, in parable, has passed through death and resurrection and has been 'received' by the Father. All that follows in his story will need to be seen in this light; Isaac is alive from the dead and at his father's side. Not only Calvary, but the open tomb, and his ascension to glory at His Father's side are all here, in type. Following Isaac's 'death, resurrection and ascension' God speaks;

And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice. (Genesis 22:16-18 KJV)

Because thou hast done this... Is this a conscious echo of God's word to the Serpent? And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: (Genesis 3:14 KJV) Satan's temptation which culminated in the man 'standing up for his rights' resulted in a curse, but here in the story of the Father and His Son, the yielding up of all his rights results in a blessing. Through the first Adam and his cooperation with the 'god of this world' a worldwide curse comes into our world, but through the last Adam and his cooperation with the true and living God comes the promise of a worldwide blessing. There are glimpses of truth here that Paul opens out in Romans; Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. (Romans 5:14 NASB)

There is surely significance too in that this full blessing for the nations comes into clear view at this point, beyond the sacrifice and the resurrection and the restoration to the father's side. It is surely significant too that there is no mention of territory in this blessing. This promise and blessing sees far beyond the Promised Land and its destiny. Abraham has revealed the Father's purpose and the future of the Son and His seed, and all because Abraham 'obeyed my voice'. (Genesis 22:18) The blessing will be unstoppable; thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies Genesis 22:17.

Abraham and Isaac now return to the 'well of the seven' at Beersheba. The sacrifice has been 'offered'. The son has been raised and the father has received him again. They return, as they had gone out to Moriah, 'together'... to Beersheba. Isaac, the son of laughter will never leave the land. This was the father's decree; And the servant said unto him, Peradventure the woman will not be willing to follow me unto this land: must I needs bring thy son again unto the land from whence thou camest? And Abraham said unto him, Beware thou that thou bring not my son thither again. (Genesis 24:5-6 KJV) The bride must come to the son.

That story awaits us, but we can conclude this one with an observation that comes in the closing verses of Genesis 22. It is after the events of Moriah; after the offering and after the resurrection that a key figure appears in the account. After many years a message reaches Abraham from his kin. Nahor, Abraham's older brother, has prospered too, and the result is a key link in God's amazing plan. Nahor has fathered eight sons, and one of the sons has had a daughter; Rebekah. As the story unfolds she will become the bride of the Son who passed through death and resurrection and is 'together' with His Father. There could be no prospect of a bride without Moriah. Just as there could be no church without Calvary.

And the place Moriah too has its later significance; Then Solomon began to build the house of the LORD at Jerusalem in mount Moriah, where the LORD appeared unto David his father, in the place that David had prepared in the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite. (2 Chronicles 3:1 KJV) In this spot where Abraham offered Isaac and received him from the dead, in a figure, Solomon would build a House for God. How wonderfully all the pictures interlock; 'thou art the Son of the living God...' '...and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall prevail against it.' (Matt 16)

Is God still able to quicken the dead? Abraham's faith settled upon the nature and character of God not upon his own inadequacy. Am I able to be what God wants me to be? Am I able to fulfil all He has prepared for me? These questions fatally put the wrong target before our faith; the real question is 'is God able?'

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work: (2 Corinthians 9:8 KJV)

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, (Ephesians 3:20 KJV)

Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25 KJV)

Yes, He is still able.

## Chapter 58

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_58

Machpelah, a costly hiding place

In the National Gallery of the Heroes of Faith there is a single reference to Jacob/Israel but with a double focus;

By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones. (Hebrews 11:21-22 KJV)

By faith, he blessed and he worshipped. The next verse makes mention of Joseph's act of faith; he gave commandment concerning his bones. If fact, Jacob gave commandment concerning his bones too;

All these are the twelve tribes of Israel: and this is it that their father spake unto them, and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them. And he charged them, and said unto them, I am to be gathered unto my people: bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, In the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite for a possession of a buryingplace. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife; and there I buried Leah. (Genesis 49:28-31 KJV)

Machpelah became the family tomb.

Why this preoccupation with a tomb? Secular historians trace the story from Genesis 23 and see in it the first historical records of Israelite possession or stake in the 'promised land'. It is one of the earliest recorded transactions in history, and it makes Israel's claim to the land incontestable; so some say. Let's be sure we have located the site properly;

And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre: the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan. (Genesis 23:19 KJV)

...so Mamre. Hebron, Machpelah are all referring to the same location. This takes us back almost to the beginning of our story when Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the LORD. (Genesis 13:18 KJV) This was where God appeared to Abram on his separation from Lot, and became the base from which he launched his private army to rescue Lot. It was in the plains of Mamre that God came visiting Abram. (Genesis 18:1) The events that provided punctuation for his life all had their links with Machpelah, Mamre and Hebron.

But this part of the story has a special time context. Calvary has been enacted in Genesis 22; the father's son has passed through death and into resurrection. He is united again in harmony with his father. Father and son dwell together in perfect harmony at the well of the seven; Beersheba. The scene is set for another remarkable revelation of the Father's heart. It seems they were still nomadic and Sarah had died in Hebron (Genesis 23:2) at 127 years of age. and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her It is a poignant picture. They had been through so much together. There can be no doubt that this was a love-match. In his grief Abraham has a request of the 'sons of Heth';

And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying, I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight. (Genesis 23:3-4 KJV)

When we recall the economy with which the scripture records events we may be encouraged to think more deeply about why the Scripture should devote a whole chapter to a burial. Perhaps the clue lies in the phrase used in Genesis 23:4 and again in Genesis 23:8; Abraham wanted to bury his 'dead out of my sight'.

In most western countries we are insulated from the consequences of death. If you ask a company of 30 year olds how many of them have actually seen a dead body you may be surprised at how few will answer. The hospital, the undertakers, the gravediggers; their work is hidden from most of us, as it 'death' itself. It has become an absence rather than a presence. But in ancient times the cruelties of death were seen quickly; this woman, desired by others and loved by Abraham had been a beauty, but now death has come and Abraham knows the consequences. Soon all her beauty will be ruined and the woman in whom he delighted will become a stench in his nostrils. This is the reality of death. Not a slipping into a peaceful sleep but a descent into dereliction and putrefaction. "Give me" he asks the sons of Heth "a burying place... that I may bury my dead out of my sight".

Adam had never seen death before sin entered, and he felt it before he saw it. "by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin" (Romans 5:12) Death is not the absence of life but the presence of a dynamic and destructive power; by one man's offence, says Paul, death reigned. (Romans 5:17) The Lord's description of Satan is interesting in the order in which it lists his vandalism; "the thief cometh not but for to steal, and to kill, and destroy". Adam died long before his body did. God had said "in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die". (Genesis 3:17) In the day he ate he died, although it was almost a thousand years before they laid his body in ground and buried it out of their sight.

Abraham needed to bury the nauseous consequences of death out of his sight. I think God is the same. Not that there is anything delicate or refined about God, but that death as the consequence of sin is repulsive to him. This is not how things were to be. Man was created to be instinct with life, death and its captives are the consequence of sin and final rebellion. Only by entering this experience Himself would Christ demonstrate His final victory; he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2:14) By means of a costly purchase Abraham achieved his purpose in providing a means of burying his dead out of his sight; God did the same.

We have referred before to the Hebrew idiom of the 'face'. The same idiom is used here; Abraham wanted to provide a place where Sarah could be buried 'out of his sight' or 'out of his presence'. It is one of the key ideas of 'sin' that God later gave to his people. The scapegoat was released into the wilderness carrying upon it the confessed sins of Israel; "and the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited" (Leviticus 16:22) Bearing upon him and bearing away from God and his people, the scape-goat carried the sins of the nation. It was the truth John Baptist testified to; "Behold, the Lamb of God which beareth away the sin of the world". The Old Testament has several places where this imagery is used; "Behold, for peace I had great bitterness: but thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back." (Isaiah 38:17 KJV) and again these wonderful words from Micah; "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob, and the mercy to Abraham, which thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old. "(Micah 7:18-20 KJV) The details are varied, 'carried away into the wilderness', 'thrown backwards over his shoulder with not a rearward look', 'cast...into the depths of the sea', but the truth is one; God has a place where he can bury His dead out of His sight'.

Where is this Machpelah? It is the place where the price was paid; it is Christ Himself. Many a Christian is haunted by the ghosts of his past; the horrors of what they had become threatens to overwhelm them. Some try to keep busy and to hide their past in their service, but that is folly. Some try to attain merit and hope that their future acts will outweigh those of the past. But there is no safety in these hiding places. We have an enemy who seems to know just where we left them and can exhume them at the most critical time. What we need is a place where all the past can be dead and buried, and can never threaten us again or be the cause of God's displeasure. What I need is a Machpelah.

Burial with Christ in Spirit baptism is a regular feature of Paul's writings;

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: (Romans 6:3-5) KJV

All that Adam's race had become was incompatible with God's plan for man. It is significant that God is never called 'the God of Adam'; in that sense God will have nothing to do with him. He is incurably dead and rotting. The only thing to do with him is to bury him out of God's sight. Paul has another reference to the 'old man' in Ephesians where he describes him as being in a process of continual corruption; "the old man which is being being continually corrupted. Death in the "old man" is not a fixed state but a continual process; its active pollution continues unabated. What can be done with such a man? There is no remedy; bury him, out of God's sight.

Paul has a word too for those who have passed through death into life with Christ;

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4 KJV)

Can everything that I have been be hidden so as to provide no enervating flashbacks or levers for an enemy to use against me. Yes. The future is not determined by the past but by the present. If I am raised with Christ, and set my affection on heavenly things, I can rest in absolute assurance that all that I was has been laid to rest in Machpelah; God has buried his dead out of His sight, and there will be no resurrections or hauntings.

## Chapter 59

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_59

a bride for the son

So we arrive at Genesis 24. It is a long chapter, more than twice the length of most others we have read together. If we were justified in asking why the Bible gave a whole chapter to a burial perhaps we should ask the same question about a wedding? If you are ever able to acquire a long 'out of print' book by Brownlow North; "Wilt thou go with this man?" I would heartily recommend it. It is a sermon written on the basis of this chapter, and very moving.

Let's remind ourselves of the chief characters in our story. Abraham means 'the father of a multitude' and in the later part of his life he begins, quite naturally, to reveal the character of God's father-heart. The earlier chapter show the steps of his faith; the later chapters do the same but we see in Abraham thrilling pictures of God's character and plan. Isaac, is the Father's Laughter (His Joy) who has passed through sacrificial death at the father's hand, and is now reunited with the father. Sarah's lifeless body has been hidden from sight. The old has passed away, all things are becoming new. There is another character in this story who will become the main focus of our thoughts; it is Abraham's 'eldest steward'. It is likely that this is the same Eliezer of Damascus referred to in Genesis 15:2, but it is the servant's role more than his specific identity which is our focus here. Perhaps there is a deeper significance in that the 'servant' remains anonymous. Then we shall meet too, the distant family of Abraham, and a particular young woman; Rebekah, whose name means either 'captive' or 'captivating'; the words seem to come from 'the loops of a cord'. We shall find that both derivations will suit our purpose.

The Father pronounces His decree. A bride must be sought for the Son who has passed through death and is alive. The nameless agent of the Father and the Son must travel into distant parts on His commission; a Bride for the Son. In the cultural pattern of the day the Bride Seeker swears a solemn oath to the Father. The Son must abide by his Father's side, and wait the endeavours of the Bride-Seeker. Again the imagery is breath-taking. Sent from the side of the Father and the Son, the divine executive, the anonymous Holy Spirit begins His journey to seek and to find, to woo and to win, a Bride for the Son. In that last sentence our story is told; all we need to do is to fill in the details.

As Abraham receives the servant's oath an unmentioned part of the story surfaces;

The LORD God of heaven, which took me from my father's house, and from the land of my kindred, and which spake unto me, and that sware unto me, saying, Unto thy seed will I give this land; he shall send his angel before thee, and thou shalt take a wife unto my son from thence.

(Genesis 24:7 KJV)

At some time in Abraham's walk with God there had been a conversation about Isaac's bride. I wonder when this could have been? Abraham was crystal clear that Jehovah who had triggered Abraham's pilgrimage and also spoken that Isaac's bride must not be from the land in which Abraham was a sojourner.

Abraham's understanding of this may be seen from his next words to his servant;

And if the woman will not be willing to follow thee, then thou shalt be clear from this my oath: only bring not my son thither again. (Genesis 24:8 KJV)

This is a remarkable statement when we consider the culture of the day in which every woman was 'owned' by someone; her father, her husband. The 'woman' had no say in her choice of Bridegroom; the woman just did as she was told. Others made all her significant decisions for her. Later on her promises and vows would only have validity if they were endorsed by the 'man' in her life. And yet here in the midst of that male dominated culture the Father insists that the Son's partner must be consulted as to her 'willingness'.

If we follow the logic of Abraham's statement we discover that the 'woman' has the final say in this matter. Theoretically, at least, this woman could frustrate the plans of the Father, Son and Holy Messenger. It will not be difficult to see where I stand on the Arminian/Calvinist divide in this; the most terrifying power that God ever placed into the hands of man, was the power to say 'no' to God. Irrespective of the father's decree, and the son's passage through sacrificial death to resurrection, and the Sent One's most earnest entreaties, finally 'the woman' must make her choice. Of course she could never have chosen unless she had been given the opportunity. The 'invitation' originates with the Father and the Son, and is carried personally by the Sent One, but finally 'the woman' will choose.

Let's pause over another word; "if the woman will not be willing to follow thee". (Genesis 24:8) This woman in the far country cannot make her own way to Isaac's side, she must be conducted step by step by the Sent One. She cannot come unless the Sent One brings her, but the Sent One will not overrule her choice. She will not come because she has made her choice but because the Sent One will conduct her safely to her Bridegroom's side. What a beautiful balance we find here in this account. The Spirit will not coerce; but 'the woman' must consent. The 'woman' cannot make the journey, unless she is willing to 'follow thee'. Oh that we would allow God to do His own work! She will not arrive at Isaac's side because she has agreed to 4 spiritual laws, or because she has made a commitment, but because she allows the Sent One to bring her.

One thing is certain; Isaac must continue to 'rest' where he is. He has passed through death into resurrection life and abides at his father's right hand; there is nothing more that the son can add to this process. The work now is in the hands of the Sent One.

The Sent One swears his oath and begins his journey. How can we express the relationship between the persons of the Godhead? It says, of God, "for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name." (Psalms 138:2b KJV) The Son has been given a name that is above every name. When the Son speaks however he says; "My Father is greater than I". He says that it is expedient that He go so that the Spirit can come, but when the Spirit arrives He only exalts the Son. There is no pride in the Godhead but mutual honour in three persons. Twice in these few verses it tells us that the Sent One has all the Father's wealth at His disposal (Genesis 24:2, 9) but

when He speaks He says “And Sarah my master's wife bare a son to my master when she was old: and unto him hath he given all that he hath.” (Genesis 24:36 KJV) There are really quite remarkable links here;

“He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you.” (John 16:14-15 KJV)

The Sent One begins His journey, and subsequently we shall discover what he has in his baggage. If this is Eliezer of Damascus we can't help but observe the absolute lack of self interest too. If Isaac had not been born all Abraham's riches would have been his. (Genesis 15:3) Now he is taking the riches that might have been his as a betrothal gift for a son's bride. As the crow flies, the distance between Beersheba and Haran is approximately 450 miles, but the Sent One was going by camel not by crow. This is a journey of several weeks through dangerous terrain, and perhaps months for the round journey. Meanwhile the Son waits by His Father's side. He arrived just at the time of sunset and the day's final visit to the local well.

He prays for God's superintendence of events, and waits;

“Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water:” (Genesis 24:13 KJV)

His prayer is that God will make 'His choice' clear by causing 'the woman' to behave in a particular way. The story is well known and well loved. He is looking for features which attract the eye, but a certain behaviour;

“And let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that thou hast shewed kindness unto my master.” (Genesis 24:14 KJV)

He is looking for the woman whom God has appointed. There is mystery here; even the woman whom God had appointed would later have to give her consent to God's plan.

The Sent One's sign was to be a woman whose generous spirit would offer water for him and his 10 camels. The dromedary has been known to drink 27 gallons of water in ten minutes! Potentially, he is looking for a woman who will offer to draw almost 300 gallons of water for a complete stranger. What induced this woman to offer to behave in this way

“And when she had done giving him drink, she said, I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking.” (Genesis 24:19 KJV)

“Until they have done drinking?” It is interesting how many strategic meetings in the Bible take place at wells. In the UK the place of general meeting was the village pump. I imagine the scene here. How many young women I wonder would have come to that place? But God's appoint-ed had an appoint-ment although she was quite unaware of it. This first consciousness of meetings God's messenger is something that she must have thought back over through the years. I would have loved to hear her testimony... of course I would have been there earlier but the goats had broken into the vegetable store... And through all the mundane and totally unimportant ingredients

of the day, it just so happened, that she arrived there before the servant got to the 'amen' in his prayer. Synchronicity the hallmark of God at work.

So we see the wonderful sovereignty of God at work, making all things work together; synergising. Looking back Rebekah would have seen a thousand significances; so do we. "I don't usually come home down that road... we don't usually... but God." And what was it in the sound of this man's voice which caught her attention. After all he was just a man like any other wasn't he? Wasn't he? I can't read this passage without another coming to mind. All the details are different; a different well, in a different country at a different time of the day, but just enough in common to make us pause in our journey to wonder a while...

"And he must needs go through Samaria. Then cometh he to a city of Samaria, which is called Sychar, near to the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well: and it was about the sixth hour. There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink." (John 4:4-7 KJV)

How different these characters are: Rebekah the beautiful virgin daughter of Bethuel and the multi-used, multi-abused, nameless hussy of Samaria. Both going about their ordinary business oblivious to the approaching 'appointment'.

Don't fear little Samaritan outcast, the One Sent from the Father and the Son has drawn near. Though all his expert followers ostracise you and your secret shames haunt you, it was necessary for Him to choose this route to meet you. This is no accident; it's not too late and its not too soon, it's His appointment. If you will hear His voice, and will 'follow' Him you may yet discover a truth beyond your wildest dreams; the Father has plan for you, and if you will 'follow' the One who speaks to you, you too may become part of His Son's virgin Bride.

## Chapter 60

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_60

a nose jewel and two bracelets

We are watching the unfolding of events pertaining to the father's son; Isaac. If we continue with our analogy of The Father, Son and Holy Executive we see interesting patterns in this account. We see that this whole chapter is an unfolding of the father's will in his determination to have a bride for his son; the son who passed through death and resurrection in the symbols of Moriah. We noted the strict admonition of Abraham that under no circumstances was Isaac to 'go into the world' to seek a bride. Isaac is the Heir to whom the Father has given "all that he hath". Isaac must abide by his father's side while another is sent, from the father and the son, into the world.

The whole passage, as we have seen, is rich in types and shadows. The stops and the steps are all recorded. Isaac makes no moves in this part of the chapter; the Servant moves and the bride will move, but Isaac must wait...

"But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting..." (Hebrews 10:12 KJV)

The Hebrews quotation runs on to speak of Christ's victory over His enemies, but in the language of the same book...

"who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2)

Meanwhile the Servant pursues his mission. Rebekah fulfils his prayer request and the servant lavished expensive gifts upon her; a nose-jewel and a pair of golden bracelets. Perhaps we can pause to consider Rebekah's response to this gesture. A complete stranger makes a simple request for water. Rebekah waters both him and his camels. The stranger fills her hands with expensive gifts. There is something about Rebekah's behaviour that is unrestrained, unguarded. What was it about the stranger's demeanour which reassured her? Something in his manner must have made her sense that he only wished her well and had no ulterior motives. In the presence of this stranger something within her was unfettered; that's what her name implies, 'fettered'. But in the presence of this stranger she is 'free' to make her own generous gestures. We live in a dangerous world, "don't take sweets from strangers", and Rebekah's world was just as dangerous, but somehow in the presence of this stranger her self-consciousness which would have ended any normal conversation abruptly is not allowed to 'fetter' her. She is amazingly free to respond to the Agent of the Father and the Son.

We learn to be suspicious at an early age; it is part of our survival strategy. It is sad to see a child with all his easy instinctive trust become guarded because he no longer trusts people. If you tease

a child relentlessly and play tricks on him you will 'fetter' him permanently; you will teach him to trust no-one. To respond to Christ the Spirit must restore this childlike instinct; without it there can be no access to the kingdom.

"Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein." (Mark 10:15 KJV)

Surely this is one of the first works of the Spirit in our lives; we find ourselves able to trust someone again. God knows this trust is vital; without it there can be no progress. It is instructive to see the way that the Lord dealt with men and women; always gaining their trust before insisting upon their commitment.

"Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou? He saith unto them, Come and see. They came and saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day: for it was about the tenth hour." (John 1:38-39 KJV)

Somehow in our evangelism we have to make time for people to trust us, to 'come and see'. The preaching of Paul and others was not the opening salvo of a naval barrage, but the careful laying of a foundation upon which further truths could be built. Did you ever notice the verse which describes the results of Paul's labours at Mars Hill?

"Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them." (Acts 17:34 KJV)

Did you notice the order? First they cleaved to Paul, then they believed. Something in the man captured them and from that place of trust they believed.

This is partly the reason why Paul is so conscious of the conscience in those who hear him. He will not overdrive them. He will not demand 'leaps of faith' but build his foundations brick by brick.

"But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." (2 Corinthians 4:2 KJV)

Our preaching must 'commend ourselves' to our hearers' conscience in the sight of God. If they cannot trust us; they will never trust what we say. It is regrettable but much 'evangelism' is simply spiritual bullying.

We see it in the wonderful account of the woman at Sychar's Well. Just watch how the prickles go down! It is an amazing journey from suspicion and downright hostility to faithful witness. It was not evangelistic technique which achieved this turn-around, but simply that He 'won' her confidence. He did so by talking and listening. He did so too because in spite of all indications to the contrary He knew that under the hurt and the prickles was a hungry heart. We need to remember this in our evangelism. We would do well to remember this simple but profound word;

"He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me. He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward.

And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.” (Matthew 10:40-42 KJV)

Interesting too that we are back to drinking.

Does Christ have a desire to drink from us? We usually put the question the other way around, but has he come to our well ready to receive something from us. The hardliner here says ‘no, there’s nothing that he wants from you’. It is not true. If you can read this and not stumble at the images, He wants you to drink from Him, and He wants to drink from you. He desires you; the real you. Not the ‘you’ as we usually regard it, sin-cursed’ and rebellious, but the ‘you’ that still exists under all that debris. I spent my childhood in the most derelict area of the UK, or so the Governments statistics reckoned. My home town had more derelict land and spoil tips, proportionately to any other part of the country; the nearest tree was a full mile away in a local park! About a hundred yards from my home was a thing called a ‘shraff tip’ or ‘shordruck’ in the dialect of the Potteries. Hundreds of thousands of tons of the refuse of the pottery industry had been dumped there; Plaster of paris moulds, lumps of hardened clay, broken cups and saucers, half used barrels of chemicals, broken packing cases. Year on year had compressed it and now it was as solid as bedrock and at least 50 feet thick, and from its base there trickled a little crystal stream, gently oozing from underneath the pollution and filth of generations. We easily become overwhelmed with the weight of all that we have become; the ‘shordruck’ fills our horizons. But there is one who has His eye on the little stream, and who says “Give me to drink”. Sometimes we are determined to deal with all the rubbish, and He says “Give me to drink”. “But, but, but...” says the heart. “Give me to drink”, comes the reply.

How was it possible for Rebekah to respond to this request? Surely it was the special presence of the stranger, and she knew she could trust him. When we begin to respond to the Lord His response is lavish; a small fortune rests in Rebekah’s hands.

“He has ascended on high” says Ephesians 4 “... and gave gifts to men”.

This is a quotation from Psalm 68,

Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the LORD God might dwell among them. (Psalms 68:18 KJV)

For the rebellious also? Has He something for the rebellious? Yes, as long as you begin to open up to Him, you will find He has gifts for the rebellious also. I have quoted this poem before I think, but it will bear repetition:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,

Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
Love said, You shall be he.  
I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
Who made the eyes but I?  
Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert, The Temple, 1633

It is important to understand that Rebekah did not earn her gifts by her offer of water. The offer of the water is just an indication of the openness of her heart. These simple responses of Rebekah to the servant are vital steps in her destiny. When we respond to Him and are willing to receive from Him, we 'enable' Him to bless us in ever greater ways. There is a little question and answer sequence in Psalm 116,

What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people. (Psalms 116:12-14 KJV)

"What shall I give?" is his familiar question. "I will receive" is his answer. The only thing I have to give is this need into which God can pour all his gracious provision. There is nothing to 'pay' until 'I have taken'. I can come as a 'rebel' and as long as I come He has gifts for the rebellious also. I really can come, "just as I am"... of course, I can't stay, "just as I am", but that's the next part of the story...

## Chapter 61

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_61

will you go with this man

It is wonderful how clearly characters are captured in just a few words in the this story. We see the mercenary streak in Rebekah's brother Laban;

And Rebekah had a brother, and his name was Laban: and Laban ran out unto the man, unto the well. And it came to pass, when he saw the earring and bracelets upon his sister's hands, and when he heard the words of Rebekah his sister, saying, Thus spake the man unto me; that he came unto the man; and, behold, he stood by the camels at the well. And he said, Come in, thou blessed of the LORD; wherefore standest thou without? for I have prepared the house, and room for the camels. (Genesis 24:29-31 KJV)

This instant character study of Laban is borne out in his subsequent dealings with Jacob. It puts me in mind of Simon in Samaria; "when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands...".

The Servant repeats his commission to Laban. It is curious that he never mentions Isaac by name but always by relationship; My master's son. When he had prayed he referred to Isaac by name (Genesis 24:14) and had referred to him as "thy servant Isaac", but to the household of Laban he is just 'my master's son'. Both Abraham and Isaac are called servants of God. It is a title which has fallen out of favour; servants. Men are ever conscious of power and authority but the distinctive character of Abraham and Isaac is the servant heart. It is not possession but relationship which comes to the surface here, and it was not by power that Abraham and Isaac received the promise to be a blessing to the nations, but because of the unbroken relationship of master and servant. They are channels not reservoirs.

Laban cannot but recognise the authority of God in the Servant's story and refuses to grant or withhold permission for the marriage;

Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, The thing proceedeth from the LORD: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good. Behold, Rebekah is before thee, take her, and go, and let her be thy master's son's wife, as the LORD hath spoken. (Genesis 24:50-51 KJV)

The servant bows in worship and opens up the treasures carried on his 10 camels; gifts for Rebekah, for Laban, for Bethuel, Rebekah's mother, and then the celebration begins. The following morning however Laban tries to delay the process. It is the familiar short term compromise of the worldling; not yet. Why did Laban do this? I suspect he had his eyes on the remainder of the camel's panniers. The worldling is always ready to bargain; Lot and his plea to be allowed to remain in Zoar; it is a little city. Now Laban; not today, next week or the week after. This

is the subtlety of the world; it seldom comes full face and says 'no' but wheels and deals, what difference will a day or two make?

Sometimes it makes the difference between death and life;

Wherefore, even as the Holy Spirit saith, To-day if ye shall hear his voice, (Hebrews 3:7 ASV)

But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:13 KJV)

(For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.) (2 Corinthians 6:2 KJV)

Since the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the date on God's invitation is always 'today'. The Servant will not tolerate this compromise; 'hinder me not'.

Laban's solution is to let the young woman make the decision; "wilt thou go with this man?" This is the all important question; "will you?" The old Anglican marriage service has lots of hidden treasures. Some people choose it for its beauty but sometimes the beauty can obscure the truth it holds. Most will have seen something similar but let's go to the original. The first part of the traditional service of matrimony was the establishing of the eligibility of both persons. In formal civil weddings this sometimes has to be stated publicly. This eligibility is then confirmed;

I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgement when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured, that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's Word doth allow are not joined together by God; neither is their Matrimony lawful.

The wedding cannot continue unless both parties are free of all other bonds of this nature. No man can serve two master and in the perfect picture no man can have two wives, or woman have two husbands. This is an exclusive relationship. It was a sad comment of Diana, Princess of Wales, that their marriage had become 'crowded'. The persons are about to give the assent to oaths which demand exclusivity and such would never be possible if prior relationships were still operating. This is why God brought Israel out of Egypt to be joined to him in matrimony. The nation could not be Pharaoh's servants and God's at the same time. The Sinai Covenant, of course was a wedding;

Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swore unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord Jehovah, and thou becamest mine. Then washed I thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil. I clothed thee also with brodered work, and shod thee with sealskin, and I girded thee about with fine linen, and covered thee with silk. And I decked thee with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck. And I put a ring upon thy nose, and ear-rings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thy head.

(Ezekiel 16:8-12 ASV)

with the same wedding tokens as the Servant had given to Rebekah.

Back to our Anglican wedding... When the eligibility has been established the other questions begin;

If no impediment be alleged, then shall the Curate say unto the Man,

Isaac, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?

The Man shall answer, I will.

This first question is addressed to the bridegroom. The cross is our Heavenly Isaac's great 'I will' to this question. These are the terms of a covenant. Will he keep faithful to his bride? Will he fellowship with her in intimate relation? Will he love her? Will he comfort (strengthen) her? Will he guard her in good times and bad? Will he, forsaking all other, keep himself 'only unto her' for life? The cross says 'I will'.

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: (Ephesians 5:25-29 KJV)

Rebekah is a good picture of the church in its virgin purity, but there is a much more rugged one earlier in that Ezekiel passage;

And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live. I have caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field, and thou hast increased and waxen great, and thou art come to excellent ornaments: thy breasts are fashioned, and thine hair is grown, whereas thou wast naked and bare. Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swore unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine. Then washed I thee with water; yea, I throughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil.(Ezekiel 16:6-9 KJV)

Here the bride is a foundling, blood spattered and abandoned. There is note here not to be missed. He wraps her in his love before He washed her clean. If we could keep this clear we would not make sanctification a 'condition of acceptance' but what it is in reality; 'the privilege of love'.

If any who reads this has any doubt let his cry ring down the centuries. "I will, be thou clean". (Matthew 8:2,3)

The officiating minister then turns to the woman;

Then shall the Priest say unto the Woman,

Rebekah, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?

The Woman shall answer, I will.

These are not questions about your present state. They do not ask 'do you obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?' but 'will you'. To ask 'do you' would be to demand qualifications, to ask 'will you' demands a choice. We have no qualifications to fit us as His bride, but when He asks the question 'will you?' we can choose. And we must for our whole future destiny depends upon it.

I wonder, did someone explain to you when you first responded that this was a covenant and that you had some responsibilities in it? Did they tell you that it was conditional upon your being willing to 'have this heavenly Isaac, as your lord and head?' Did they tell you that you were promising to 'obey him, and serve him?' Did they tell you that you were promising to love him, and honour him in the good times and the bad?' Did they tell you that you were opting into a life long exclusive relationship? Or did they tell you to invite Jesus into your heart?

The traditional service of matrimony now moves on. The two parties have declared their willingness, surely that's it they are married now? No they are not! Now they must carry out their decisions. It is recorded of the prodigal son that he said;

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father... (Luke 15:18-20a KJV)

His decision is recorded in verses 18 and 19; his salvation is recorded in verse 20. Without the 'getting up and moving towards his father' his fine decision would have left him in the pigsty.

The declaration of mutual willingness is not enough.

Then shall they give their troth to each other in this manner. The Minister, receiving the Woman at her father's or friend's hands, shall cause the Man with his right hand to take the Woman by her right hand, and to say after him as followeth.

I Isaac, take thee Rebekah. to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.

Then shall they loose their hands; and the Woman, with her right hand taking the Man by his right hand, shall likewise say after the Minister,

I Rebekah, take thee Isaac, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.

It's become the fuel for jokes, 'plighting my troth'. It simple means 'I pledge my word', but notice the orientation of this part of the service. The first part was a conversation between each individual and the one asking the questions. Now it becomes a conversation between the two partners. They are talking to each other, for the first time in the service of matrimony.

Do you hear the question in your heart? Will you follow this representative of the Father and the Son? I don't ask how you feel or what your experience has been, only 'will you go?' If you do He will lead you into the presence of a heavenly Isaac, and in that moment of personal encounter you can talk to each other, and give and receive each other's pledged word.

## Chapter 62

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Abraham, My Friend

The Making of a Praying Man\_62

Rebekah arose... and followed the man

The prodigal 'arose and came to his father'; Rebekah arises and 'follows the man' whose responsibility is much like that that Paul expressed;

For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. (2 Corinthians 11:2 KJV)

He will now watch over her with scrupulous vigilance until he can place her in the care of her betrothed husband. As a consequence we shall be able to see some links between the history of Isaac's bride and Christ's. There is a Psalm and a whole Bible book which will help us to make the connections. The Psalm is 45, the book the Song of Songs. Just a word of caution before we begin; the 'Bride of Christ' is a phrase never used of individuals or local churches, but always of the whole body of Christ. Isn't this confusing the pictures to speak of brides and bodies in the same breath? Not if we recall that Adam's bride was 'bone of his bones, and flesh of his flesh'.

Charles Wesley wrote a wonderful hymn capturing all this rich imagery;

See there the quickening Cause of all

Who live the life of grace beneath!

God caused on Him the sleep to fall,

And lo, His eyes are closed in death!

He sleeps: and from His open side

The mingled blood and water flow;

They both give being to His bride,

And wash His church as white as snow.

We cannot pause to pursue the theme here.

Psalm 45 has the title 'a Song of Loves'; note the plural. It is a song of two loves; the love of the Bride for her Bridegroom, and the love of the Bridegroom for His Bride. The Bride has eyes only for Her Bridegroom; and He for her. The first half of the psalm describes the Bridegroom whose garments have a unique perfume; you would scent Him before you saw Him. The odour is unmistakably His. His person evokes the scent, and His scent evokes the person. It is the opening theme of the Song of Songs;

Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee. (Song of Solomon 1:3 KJV)

The man and his sweet savour were one and the same. To speak his name was to smell the familiar scents of a hundred encounters. Perfumes have the power to evoke memories; some memories have the power to evoke perfumes.

The Bridegroom of Psalm 45 is a King; He has entered into His inheritance. His reign is settled and secure. It is an image of Him who has ascended to His Father's throne and the writer to the Hebrews uses the language of this psalm to confirm the truth;

But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: (Hebrews 1:8-10 KJV)

Christ has received His High-Priestly anointing and is now Priest-King forever, after the pattern of Melchizedek; the sweet smell of the anointing oil pervades the Temple-Palace. All the images begin to blend together, as another wonderful hymnwriter expressed it;

1. Join all the glorious names

Of wisdom, love, and power,

That ever mortals knew,

That angels ever bore:

All are too mean to speak His worth,

To poor to set my Savior forth.

8. Jesus, my great High Priest,

Offered His blood, and died;

My guilty conscience seeks

No sacrifice beside:

His powerful blood did once atone,

And now it pleads before the throne.

9. My Advocate appears

For my defense on high;

The Father bows his ears,

And lays his thunder by:

Not all that hell or sin can say

Shall turn his heart, his love away.

10. My dear almighty Lord,  
My Conqueror and my King,  
Thy scepter and Thy sword,  
Thy reigning grace I sing:  
Thine is the power; behold I sit  
In willing bonds beneath Thy feet.

There are 12 verses to this hymn. If your church sings 6 you are being short-changed! No one image can set forth all that there is to be said, but at times the images blend wonderfully.

The Bridegroom begins to speak to His Bride;

Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy father's house; (Psalms 45:10 KJV)

The Bride must turn her back on all the past and its associations. Like the man, the woman too, must leave and cleave. Rebekah can never be the Bride if she remains in her old country and among her own people.

The Bride of Christ is a people that has left all the old ways;

And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; (Revelation 5:9 KJV)

This is the Greek word 'ek' or 'ex'. Did you know that the Church of Christ is made up of 'ex-es'? ex-kindred/tribe/clan, ex-language groups, ex-people groups, ex-nationals/ethnics. They were 'no-people' who have become the 'people of God'. Rebekah, the Bride of Psalm 45, the Church of Christ must all put their people and their father's house behind them. Behold, all things are made new. It does not mean that we will not retain an affection for our 'roots' but it can never take precedence over the new roots, and all the old relationships must fade into insignificance in the light of this new relationship;

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26 KJV)

I wonder how many natural marriages have foundered because one partner refused to 'leave' when they 'cleaved'? They bring into their marriage, mothers, or sisters, or old memories, and in effect, do not 'forsake all others'; three is one too many in any marriage.

So

And Rebekah arose, and her damsels, and they rode upon the camels, and followed the man: and the servant took Rebekah, and went his way. (Genesis 24:61 KJV)

She followed and He took her; what a lovely picture of separate but interdependent action. So Rebekah retraces the steps of Abraham all those years before who obeyed the word

Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: (Genesis 12:1 KJV)

There can be no continuing link between the old and the new; Abraham must leave it, Isaac must never return to it, and now Rebekah must 'leave' too, before she can 'cleave'. Every step brings her closer to her Bridegroom, and every step takes her farther away from all her yesterdays. Old things have passed away, behold, all things are become new. If we will only 'follow', He will 'take us'.

The Bride of Psalm 45 is not only richly dressed, she is also 'glorious within'.

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25-27 KJV)

This is the work of the Spirit today, to prepare a Bride for the Lamb, and it is the work of those who understand God's purposes;

Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily. (Colossians 1:25-29 KJV)

The Servant brings Rebekah to her Bridegroom at just the moment when the Bridegroom is walking in the fields 'to meet us'. I cannot read the verse without hearing Paul's words;

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 KJV)

Oh with what longing our heavenly Isaac awaits this moment. As soon as Rebekah sees him and knows him she dismounts, replaces her veil and walks towards him; it is one of the most romantic moments in the Bible, but not as romantic as 1 Thess 4:16,17 above. Servant and the Father's Son speak of the journey; what a journey it has been, thousands of years... and Isaac takes her and brings her into the privacy of his mother's tent; it becomes their Bridal chamber, and we can follow them no further. The tent door flaps shut and Bride and Bridegroom vanish from our curious eyes.

... the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee. (Song of Solomon 1:4b KJV)

She has lost everything, Rebekah. All she has is simply the result of her unique relationship to the Father's Son. Listen to a Bride;

"My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies. Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bethel." (Song of Solomon 2:16-17 KJV)

Treasures, cities, thrones, powers, inheritance, they all pale into insignificance; "My beloved is mine, and I am His".

This is the end of our story. The next chapter ties up a few ends, and Abraham's death is followed by the simple account of his burial. Faithful Abraham, like David after him, "served his generation by the will of God and fell asleep". His body sleeps where it was planted but Abraham has found his city, and when faith comes and we discover that we have already come, not to a smoking mountain...

But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24 KJV)

...we discover the spirits of just men made perfect. Abraham was not left behind; he is home.

Did I say this was the end of our story? Surely not, it is only the end of time's story; the next chapters belong to the Son and His Bride. This is only the end of the beginning.

Thou dost seek a Bride all pure and holy;

Those who now belong to Thee alone.

Those who give thee all their hearts' affection;

Of Thyself, a part; bone of Thy bone.

Lord, we answer to Thy heart's deep longing,

Even so, come quickly" Lord we say.

In our hearts we have the blessed answer;

Rise My love, my fair one. Come away.

Drawn from every nation, tribe and kindred

By Thy Spirit's mighty power.

Finding rest in Thee, God's great salvation,

Waits Thy Bride, for Thine appointed hour.

Sharing with Thee, in this world's rejection.

Putting on the death to gain a crown

By thy Blood and Word, they're overcomers  
With Thee, in Thy Throne, they shall sit down.

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